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TechLife NEWS

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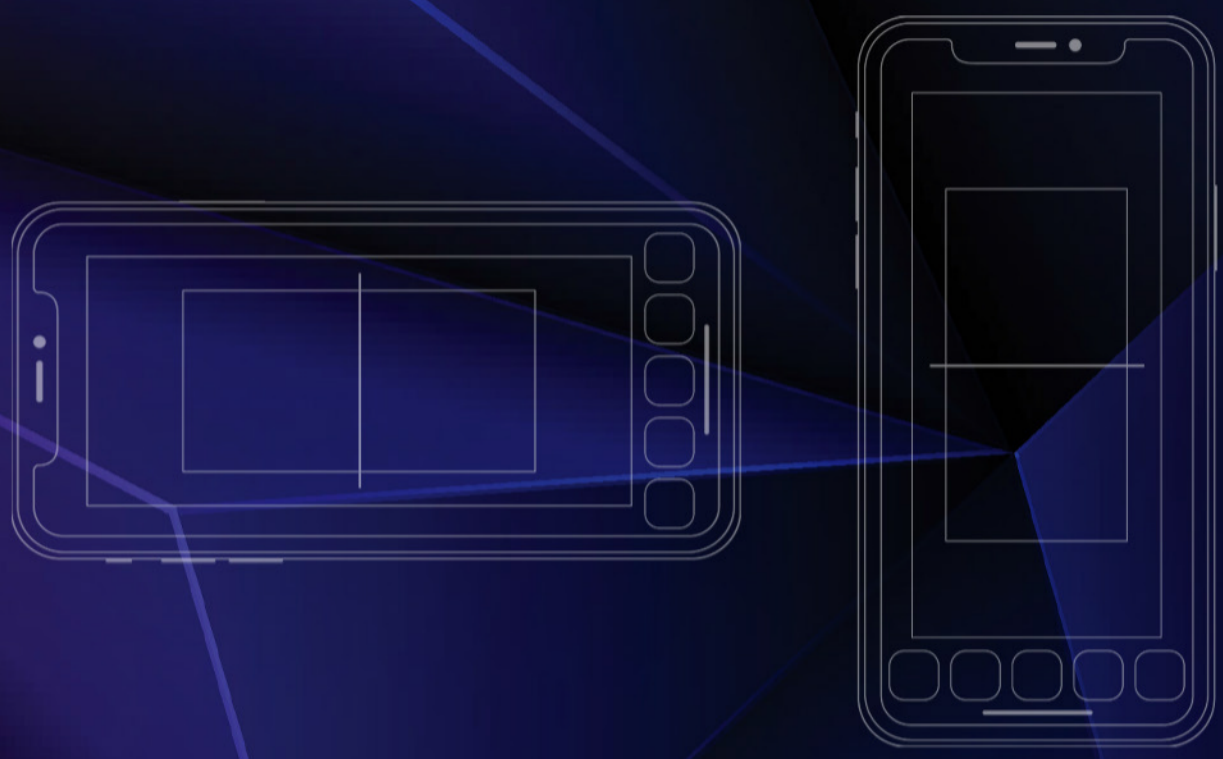

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NYC'S AI CHATBOT WAS CAUGHT TELLING BUSINESSES TO BREAK THE LAW. THE CITY ISN'T TAKING IT DOWN

An artificial intelligence-powered chatbot created by New York City to help small business owners is under criticism for dispensing bizarre advice that misstates local policies and advises companies to violate the law.

But days after the issues were first reported last week by tech news outlet The Markup, the city has opted to leave the tool on its official government website. Mayor Eric Adams defended the decision this week even as he acknowledged the chatbot's answers were "wrong in some areas."

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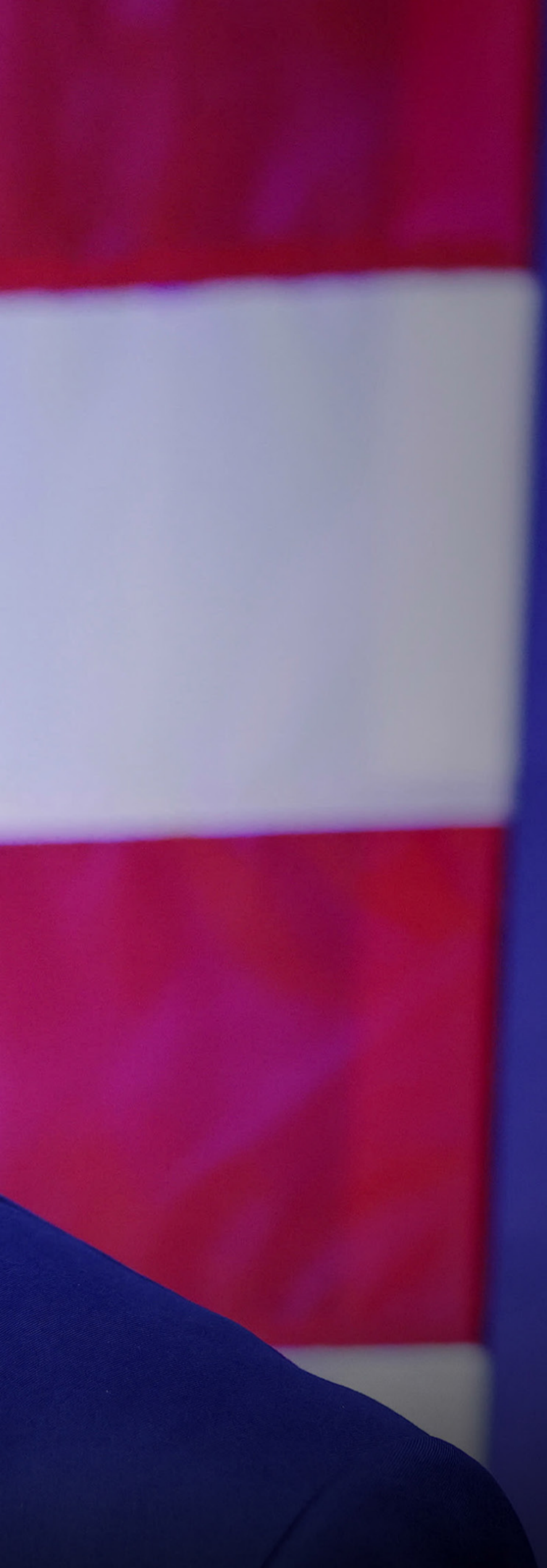
NEW YORK CITY

Image: Eduardo Munoz



Launched in October as a "one-stop shop" for business owners, the chatbot offers users algorithmically generated text responses to questions about navigating the city's bureaucratic maze.

It includes a disclaimer that it may "occasionally produce incorrect, harmful or biased" information and the caveat, since-strengthened, that its answers are not legal advice.

It continues to dole out false guidance, troubling experts who say the buggy system highlights the dangers of governments embracing AI-powered systems without sufficient guardrails.

"They're rolling out software that is unproven without oversight," said Julia Stoyanovich, a computer science professor and director of the Center for Responsible AI at New York University. "It's clear they have no intention of doing what's responsible."

In responses to questions posed Wednesday, the chatbot falsely suggested it is legal for an employer to fire a worker who complains about sexual harassment, doesn't disclose a pregnancy or refuses to cut their dreadlocks. Contradicting two of the city's signature waste initiatives, it claimed that businesses can put their trash in black garbage bags and are not required to compost.

At times, the bot's answers veered into the absurd. Asked if a restaurant could serve cheese nibbled on by a rodent, it responded: "Yes, you can still serve the cheese to customers if it has rat bites," before adding that it was important to assess the "the extent of the damage caused by the rat" and to "inform customers about the situation."

A spokesperson for Microsoft, which powers the bot through its Azure AI services, said the company was working with city employees "to improve the service and ensure the outputs are accurate and grounded on the city's official documentation."

At a press conference Tuesday, Adams, a Democrat, suggested that allowing users to find issues is just part of ironing out kinks in new technology.

"Anyone that knows technology knows this is how it's done," he said. "Only those who are fearful sit down and say, 'Oh, it is not working the way we want, now we have to run away from it all together.' I don't live that way."

Stoyanovich called that approach "reckless and irresponsible."

Scientists have long voiced concerns about the drawbacks of these kinds of large language models, which are trained on troves of text pulled from the internet and prone to spitting out answers that are inaccurate and illogical.

But as the success of ChatGPT and other chatbots have captured the public attention, private companies have rolled out their own products, with mixed results. Earlier this month, a court ordered Air Canada to refund a customer after a company chatbot misstated the airline's refund policy. Both TurboTax and H&R Block have faced recent criticism for deploying chatbots that give out bad tax-prep advice.

Jevin West, a professor at the University of Washington and co-founder of the Center for an Informed Public, said the stakes are especially high when the models are promoted by the public sector.

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"There's a different level of trust that's given to government," West said. "Public officials need to consider what kind of damage they can do if someone was to follow this advice and get themselves in trouble."

Experts say other cities that use chatbots have typically confined them to a more limited set of inputs, cutting down on misinformation.

Ted Ross, the chief information officer in Los Angeles, said the city closely curated the content used by its chatbots, which do not rely on large language models.

The pitfalls of New York's chatbot should serve as a cautionary tale for other cities, said Suresh Venkatasubramanian, the director of the Center for Technological Responsibility, Reimagination, and Redesign at Brown University.

"It should make cities think about why they want to use chatbots, and what problem they are trying to solve," he wrote in an email. "If the chatbots are used to replace a person, then you lose accountability while not getting anything in return."

Image: Peter K. Afriyie

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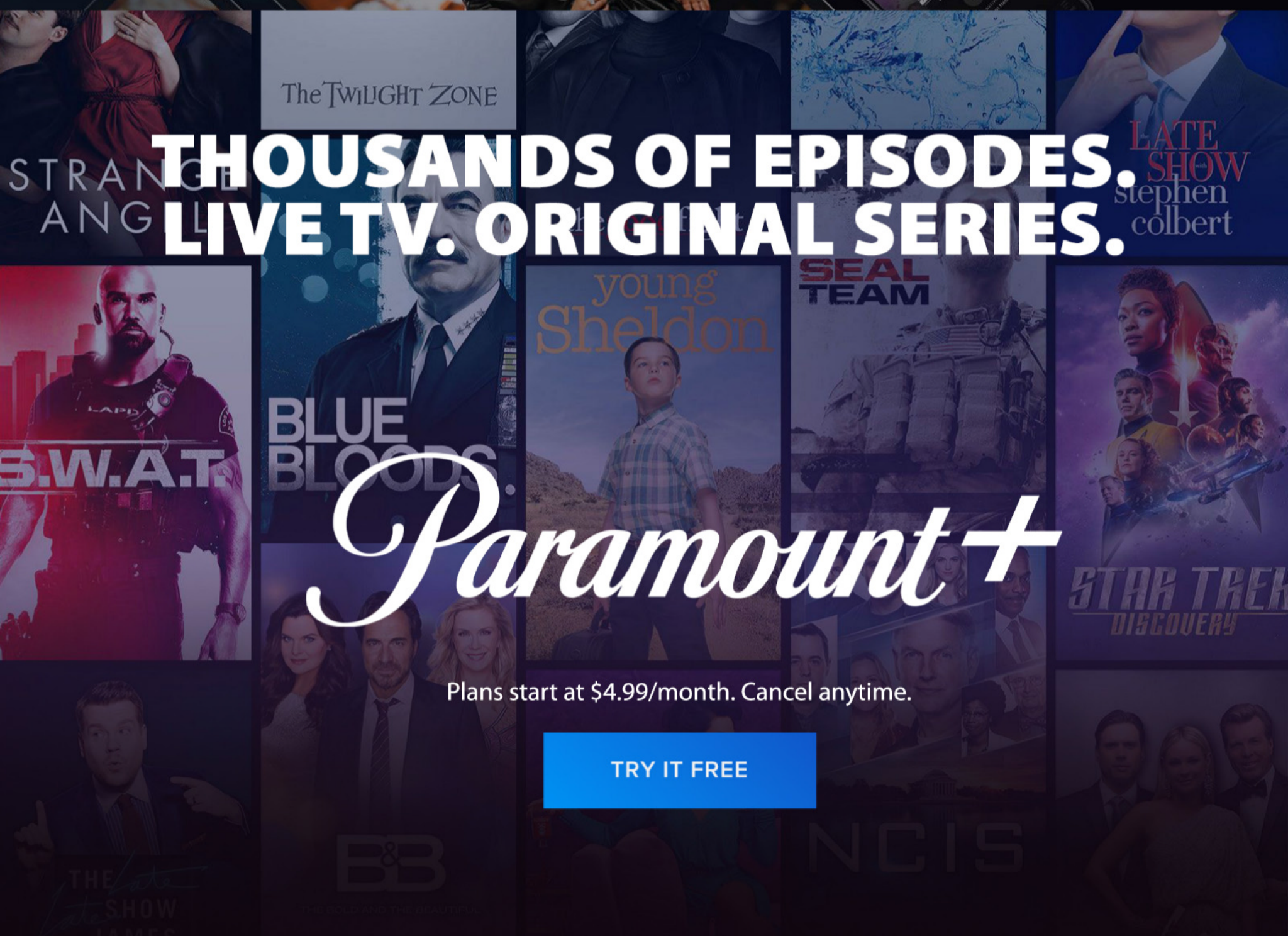

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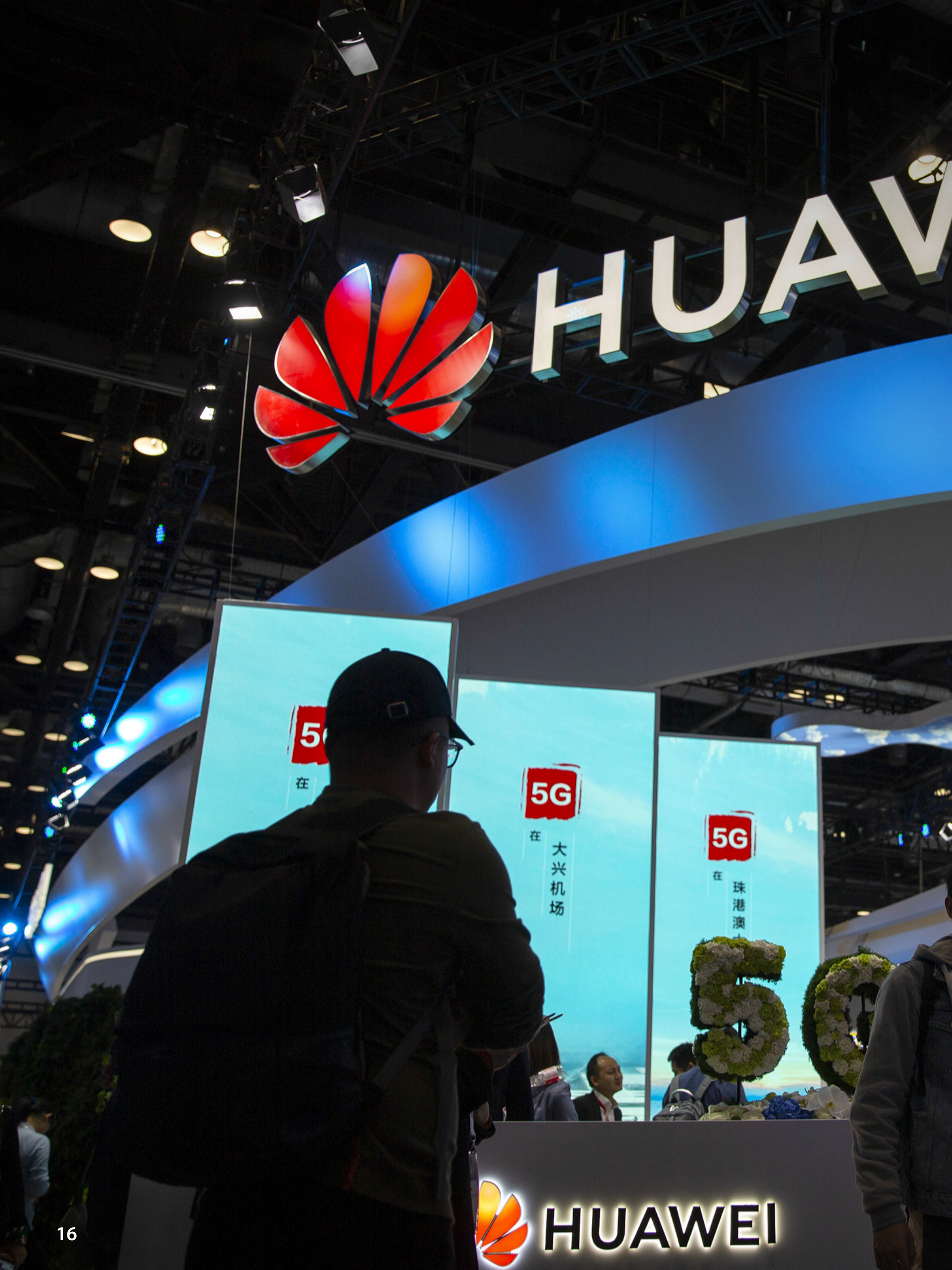
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HUAWEI'S PROFIT MORE THAN DOUBLES IN 2023, SALES UP 9.6% AS CLOUD AND DIGITAL BUSINESSES GROW

HUAWE

Chinese telecoms gear company Huawei Technologies has reported its profit more than doubled last year as its cloud and digital businesses thrived in spite of U.S. sanctions.

The Shenzhen-based company reported a net profit of 87 billion yuan ($12 billion), helped by strong sales and an improved product portfolio. Revenue jumped nearly 10% from a year earlier, to 704.2 billion yuan ($97.4 billion).

Huawei's rotating chairman Ken Hu said the company's figures were in line with forecasts.

"We've been through a lot over the past few years. But through one challenge after another, we've managed to grow," Hu said.

Huawei also said it profited from "gains from the sales of some businesses." It did not specify which businesses were sold.

Huawei, one of China's first global tech brands, has been caught up in China-U.S. tensions over technology and security.

The U.S. has banned U.S. companies from doing business with Huawei, cutting off its access to computer chips and software such as Google services for its smartphones and preventing it from selling its telecommunications gear to U.S. customers.

Washington says Huawei poses a threat to U.S. national security. Huawei denies that.

Huawei has refocused its business on cloud computing services and helping industries to shift to more digital operations.

Revenues from its cloud computing business grew almost 22% year-on-year in 2023 to 55.3 billion yuan ($7.7 billion). Sales for its digital

HUAW
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HUAWEI

power business grew 3.5%. Its automotive services related sales more than doubled.

Huawei's consumer unit, which sells smartphones and other devices, posted a 17.3% jump in revenue in 2023.

Last year, Huawei launched its high-end Mate 60 smartphone line, powered by an advanced chip that it made together with China's Semiconductor Manufacturing International Corporation (SMIC).

"In 2024, we will further expand our presence in the high-end market by working with ecosystem partners worldwide to bring more innovative products and services to consumers across the globe," the company said in a statement to the AP.

The launch of the Mate 60 prompted speculation that Huawei and China may be able to produce 5G chips.

U.S. lawmakers later accused SMIC of violating U.S. sanctions by supplying chips to Huawei. Taiwan also launched an investigation into four local companies over reports that they helped Huawei in its chip efforts. Some of the companies said they were offering wastewater and environmental protection services unrelated to critical technology.

Huawei is one of the world's biggest spenders in research and development. In 2023, it invested 164.7 billion yuan ($22.8 billion) into R&D, accounting for almost a quarter of its annual revenue. Just over half of Huawei's 207,000 employees work in R&D.

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FORD TO DELAY PRODUCTION OF NEW ELECTRIC PICKUP AND LARGE SUV AS US EV SALES GROWTH SLOWS

With U.S. electric vehicle sales starting to slow, Ford Motor Co. says it will delay rolling out new electric pickup trucks and a new large electric SUV as it adds gas-electric hybrids to its model lineup.

The Dearborn, Michigan, company said Thursday that a much ballyhooed new electric pickup to be built at a new factory in Tennessee will be delayed by a year until 2026.

The big electric SUV, with three rows of seats, will be delayed by two years until 2027 at the company's factory in Oakville, Ontario near Toronto.

The retreat comes as U.S. electric vehicle sales growth slowed to 2.7% in the first quarter of the year, far below the 47% increase that fueled record sales and a 7.6% market share last year. Sales of new vehicles overall grew nearly 5%, and the EV market share declined to 7.1%.

Image: Lukas Schulze

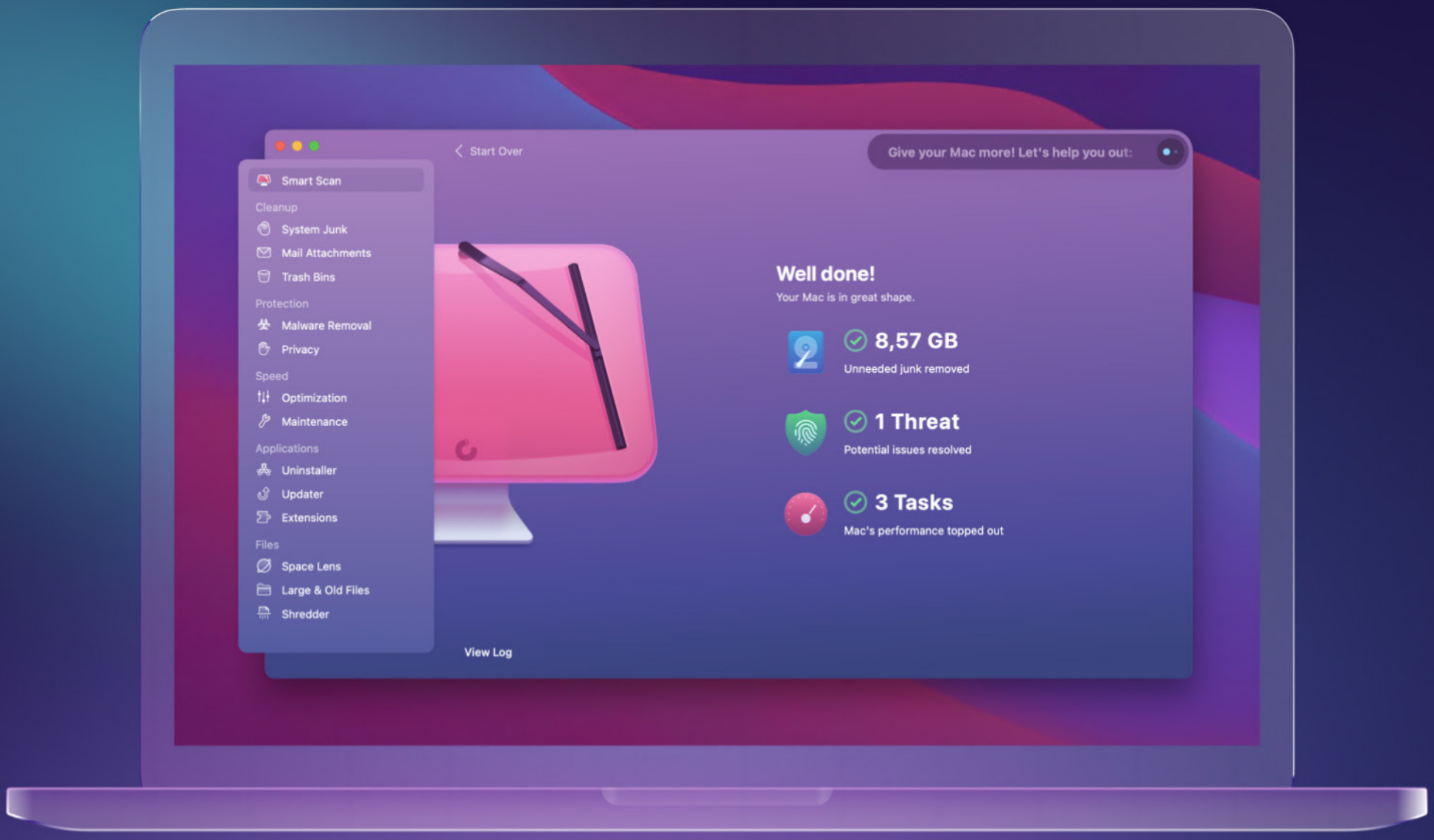
ROFA
06

Hybrid sales, however, grew 45% from January through March, while plug-in hybrids, which can go a short distance on battery power before a gas-electric system kicks in, grew 34% according to Motorintelligence.com.

Ford also said it "expects to offer" hybrid versions of all its gasoline passenger vehicles by the end of the decade in North America.

Industry analysts say most early technology adopters and people who want to cut emissions have already purchased EVs. Automakers now have to convince skeptical mainstream buyers to go electric, but those customers fear limited range and a lack of charging stations.

Ford expects pretax losses for its electric vehicle unit to widen from $4.7 billion last year to a range of $5 billion to $5.5 billion this year. But it foresees commercial vehicles making $8 billion to $9 billion, up from $7.2 billion last year. Gasoline powered vehicles and hybrids are expected to make $7 billion to $7.5 billion, about even with last year.



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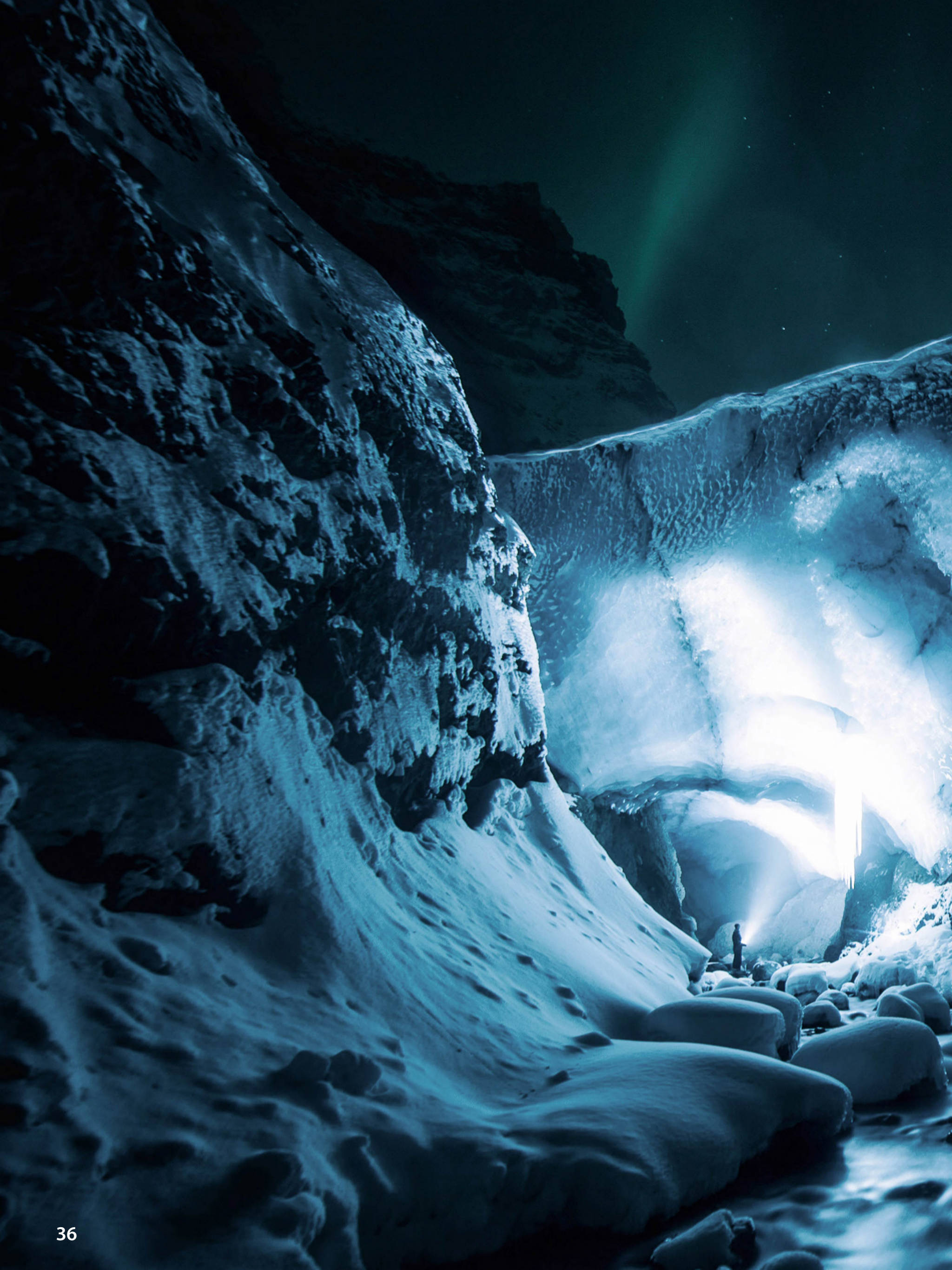

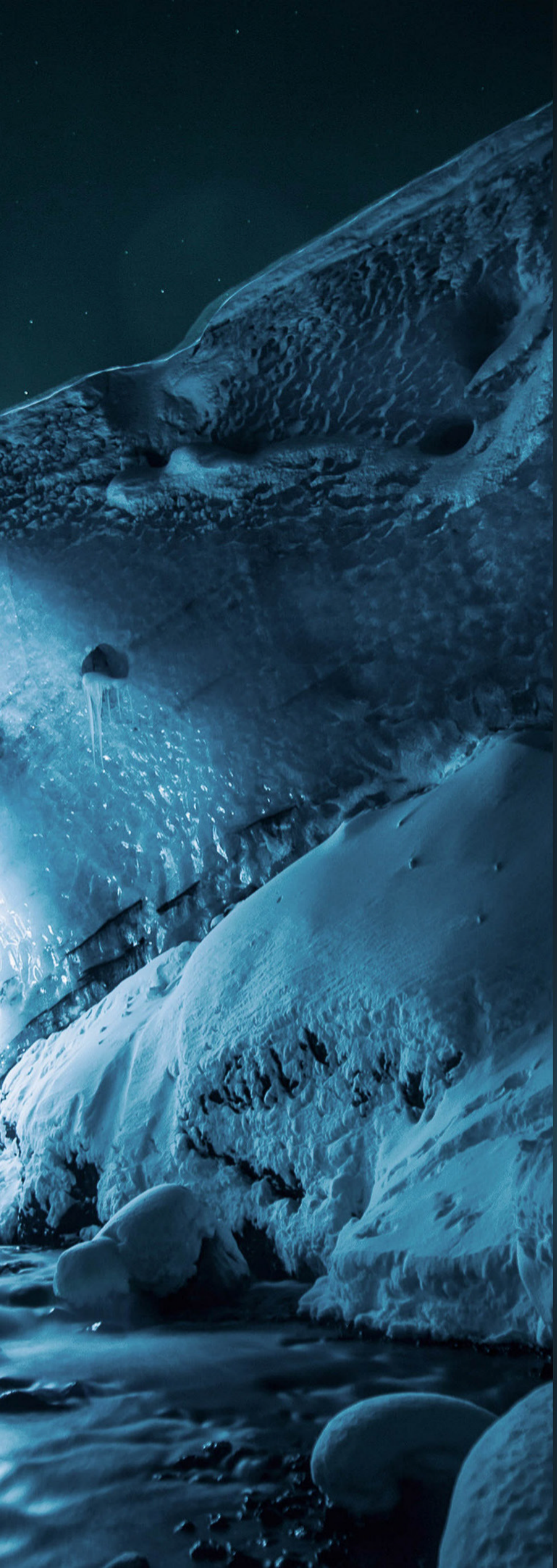

At home in the New York City suburbs, Oscar Sandoval has lots of friends and an active social life. But when it's time for vacation, he prefers to keep it quiet. Like, literally.

Sandoval began practicing Zen Buddhism a few years back, and has been on silent retreats to Buddhist monasteries around San Francisco and elsewhere. He'd stroll, sit, do some gardening and generally contemplate life for a week. More recently, he's done solo backpacking trips across Spain.

"The internal experience varies from times of very little thinking to periods of many thoughts or songs playing in my head," he says. "The utter peace and stillness is impossible to put into words."

Travel journalist Chloe Berge bemoaned the buzzing interruption of a drone while she was hiking the Faroe Islands' remote coastline during the pandemic. "The world is getting louder, and it's increasingly harder to escape the noise, even in nature."

But it's worth a try, say the travelers who are seeking relief in silence. Or as close as they can get to it.

From serene nature retreats to silent walking, the quest for quietude has become one of modern travel's latest trends. Conde Nast Traveler said last month it was "the travel trend we're most obsessed with this year."

For many, quiet travel goes beyond escaping the cacophony of everyday life while on vacation. It can be a shift toward introspection; a deeper connection with where we are both literally and figuratively.

You might even feel healthier.

In a study published in the journal JAMA Psychiatry in late 2022, for instance, mindfulness meditation worked as well as a standard drug for treating anxiety.

"Transformative travel's a trend we're tracking for growth," says Alex Hawkins, editor at the trend forecaster and consultancy The Future Laboratory. "It taps into consumers' desire for self-reflective tourism experiences."

The "wellness tourism industry," he says, includes "demand for hyper-personal holidays and health-driven stays."

PEACEFUL PAMPERING

The company Dark Retreats Oregon offers a five-day "Dark Retreat" in Tidewater, Oregon, as "a great space for self-care" through darkness, digital detox and a healthy diet. Participants can keep the lights off as much as they want during their stay, and can also decide how much they talk to others.

BookRetreats, which urges clients to "Unplug. De-stress. Recharge," offers silent meditation retreats in Bali, Portugal, Mexico and the Netherlands, and closer to home in North Carolina, Quebec and California.

Finland's Utula Nature offers a silent stay amidst the pines on Lake Saimaa, about five hours from Helsinki.

SERENE STROLLING

Ditching the phone, zipping your lip, and putting on your comfy hikers; that's the silent walking trend that's found thousands of friends on TikTok.

Gordon Hempton is an acoustic ecologist in Washington State also known as The Sound Tracker. He's spent several decades roaming rainforests, coastlines and deserts looking for interesting and often rare nature sounds — sounds you can't easily hear when there's a lot of human-made noise. "I care very deeply about quiet," he says.

He's a co-founder of Quiet Parks International, a non-profit created to raise awareness of the benefits for both people and wildlife of less noise. Ecuador's Zabalo River park was the first to receive quiet park designation – it's not technically "quiet," of course: Howler monkeys, birds, insects and the thrum of the river provide a natural soundtrack. But the nearest concentration of human activity is a village of roughly 200 people, about 10 miles away.

There are even a couple of urban areas designated as quiet parks – one just outside the bustling metropolis of Taipei, Taiwan's capital. Another is in Hampstead Heath, about 30 miles from central London. The grassy, 800-acre park inspired C.S. Lewis' "The Chronicles of Narnia."

Quiet Parks International offers experiences like forest bathing, where you open your senses to the meditative and relaxing elements of a walk in the woods.

For those who can't get out to nature, the Quiet Parks website has recordings of wildlife and weather in the rainforest; morning in the West Texas desert; and sounds of day and nightfall in northern Alaska.

LOW-KEY LOST

Black Tomato's got an interesting proposition for you. The avant-garde travel company offers a trip they call Get Lost. You fill out an extensive questionnaire on what you're expecting from your escape, but you'll have no idea where you're going till they get you there. Environment options are Polar, Desert, Coastal, Jungle or Mountain.

You're given pre-trip prep advice and navigation instruction, and then, at trip time, all the transfers, gear and mapped-out checkpoints you'll need. Your progress is monitored by a specialist in the chosen environment and by a local guiding support team. You can bail out at any time.

"We've sent clients to Iceland and Alaska," says Black Tomato's co-founder Tom Marchant. "We sent one solo traveler to Mongolia." A woman trekked on her own across Morocco's Atlas Mountains.

Marchant says there's the challenge of managing the environment, but "it's also a time to truly disconnect from daily life in an entirely new way."

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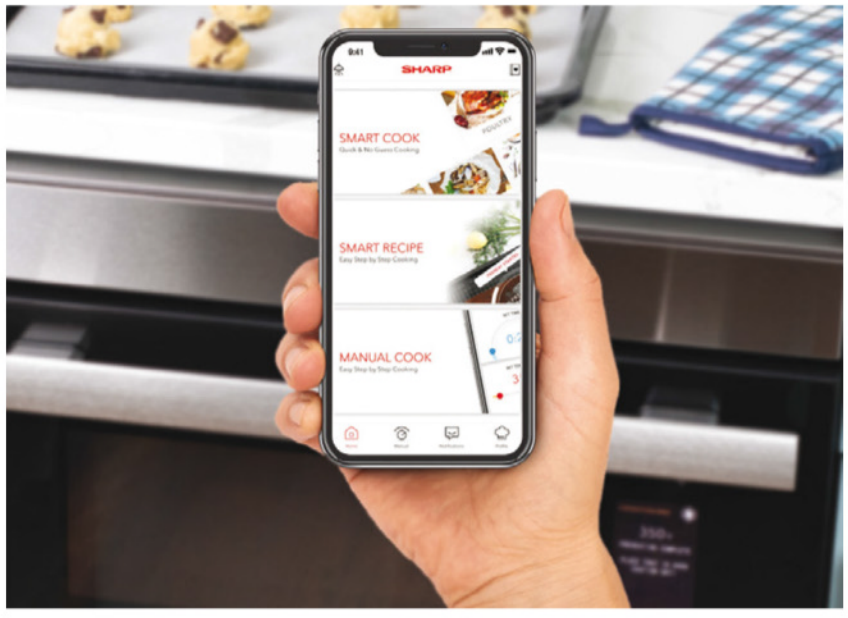

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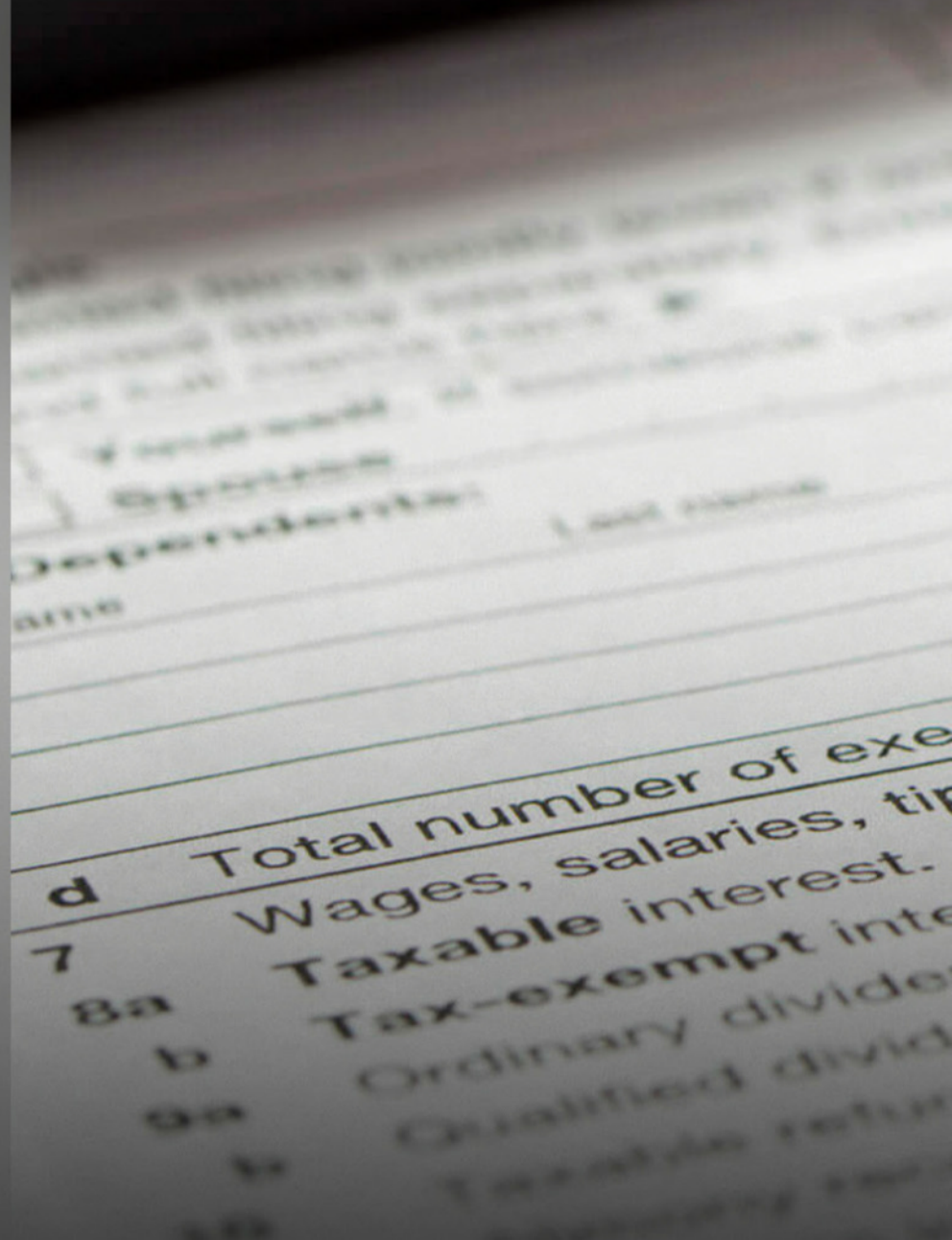
HERE'S HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF FROM COMMON SCAMS THIS TAX SEASON



Tax season can come with several headaches, from gathering documents to finding the time to sit down and file. But one pain that you want to avoid is falling for a tax scam.

Year-round, scammers look for ways to trick people into giving them money or personal information. There are several common types of scams during tax season, so people should be on the lookout for red flags, said Amy Nofziger, director of victim support at the AARP Fraud Watch Network.

One of the most common types of scams is related to identity theft. Taxpayers usually know their identity has been stolen when they try to file

their tax returns and the IRS says they've already done so. This usually means someone else filed in their name in order to receive a refund.

In 2023, the IRS received 294,138 identity theft complaints. The IRS says taxpayers who are victims of tax-related identity theft wait an average of 19 months for the IRS to process their returns and send their refunds.

Here are some expert recommendations to protect yourself from scams during tax season:

KNOW SCAMMERS' TACTICS

Three common tactics used by scammers are based on fear, urgency and money, said security expert Petros Efstathopoulos. Here's how they work:

— Fear

When a scammer contacts you via phone or email, they use language that makes it seem like there is a problem that you need to solve. For example, a scammer contacts you over email telling you that your tax return has an error and if you don't fix it you'll get in trouble.

— Urgency

Because scammers are good at creating a sense of urgency, people tend to rush, which makes them vulnerable. Scammers often tell people they need to act right away, which can lead to them sharing private information such as their Social Security numbers.

"When people are under pressure and under anxiety, they might do something with the speed that they're not thinking through it and not doing their research," Nofziger said.

WARNING
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— Money

Scammers use money as bait, Efstathopoulos said. They might impersonate tax professionals or the IRS saying you will get a bigger refund than you expect if you pay them for their services or share your personal information.

CHECK IF IT'S REALLY THE IRS CONTACTING YOU

It's very important to know that the IRS never reaches out via unconventional means, said Dr. Zulfikar Ramzan, chief scientist at Aura, a digital security company. The IRS usually contacts taxpayers via physical mail through the U.S. Postal Service.

"Typically, they're going to ask you to contact them either via their website or by sending correspondence directly to their main address, which is easy to verify," Ramzan said.

A common impersonation scam is when someone calls you claiming they work for the IRS and demanding an immediate payment, Nofziger said.

You can find out more about how the IRS contacts people here.

RESEARCH TAX PROFESSIONALS

If you need help from a tax professional, research them to make sure they are not imposters, Nofziger said.

"You'll see advertisements for low-cost tax preparers that can get you more money than anybody else," Nofziger said. "They will advertise on social media or set up shops in strip malls."

To avoid getting scammed by fake tax preparers, Nofziger recommends that you look for reputable lists. Options include the IRS directory of tax professionals and the AARP Foundation tax-aid locator.

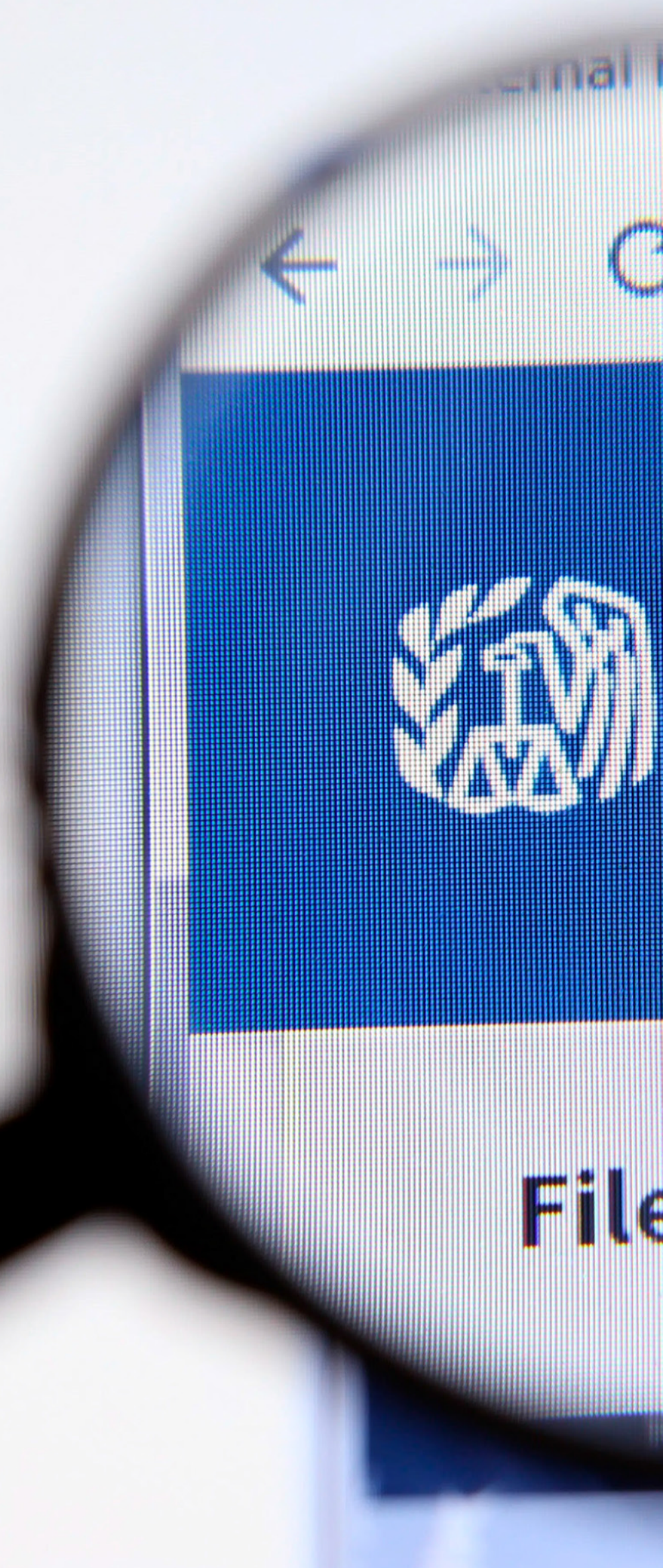
DON'T PICK UP IF YOU DON'T KNOW WHO IS CALLING

Scammers often reach out by phone and Efstathopoulos recommends that you don't share information on incoming calls.

"If my bank calls me and says 'Hi, I need some information', I say 'Thank you very much, I'll call you back on the number I know is yours,'" Efstathopoulos said.

That makes it easier to know for sure that you're not talking to a scammer. As a general rule of thumb, banks don't often call unless there is suspicious activity on your account or if you previously contacted them about a problem with your account.

If you receive many unknown calls that end up being scammers or robocalls, Nofziger recommends using tools available on your phone to block spam. Check here for how to do this on you iPhone and here for Android.



IRS

USE ALL OF THE TECHNOLOGY AT YOUR DISPOSAL

Filing your taxes early is always recommended in case someone else tries to file for you, Efstathopoulos said. But if that is not an option, you can take other steps that make you less vulnerable to scams. These include using the IRS pin system, having a password manager and checking that your computer doesn't have a virus.

— Identity protection PIN

The IRS offers an identity protection PIN, which is a six-digit number, to protect taxpayers from someone else filing for them. This number helps the IRS verify your identity when you're filing.

"Every time you see an opportunity to turn on two-factor authentication, take it and make sure it's turned on," Efstathopoulos recommended.

— Password manager

Efstathopoulos also recommends using a password manager on your devices to ensure you're utilizing a complex password that scammers can't guess.

— Credit report check

Regularly checking your credit report and bank statements is a good practice since it can help you identify if someone has been using your bank account without your knowledge, Ramzan said. If your bank lets you set alerts for big transactions you should take advantage of that extra security measure, he added.

— Clean your computer

If you're filing your tax returns online, you want to make sure your computer is free of viruses, Ramzan said. Even if the tax filing software you're using is safe, if your computer has a virus, someone could steal your personal information.

SHARE WHAT YOU KNOW WITH LOVED ONES

If you've taken all the necessary steps to protect yourself, you might want to help those around you, Nofziger said. Whether you're helping your grandparents to block unknown callers on their phones or sharing tips with your neighbors, talking with others about how to protect themselves from scams can be very effective.

SCAMS DON'T END WITH TAX SEASON

Even when you've already filed your taxes, there are other scams that you should keep an eye out for. Scams surrounding refunds and tax corrections are some of the most common.

"We know that wherever the money is, the criminals are going to be there," Nofziger said. "And that includes this time when there is money being sent to people."

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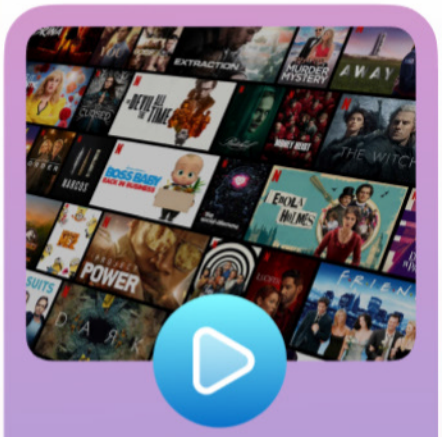

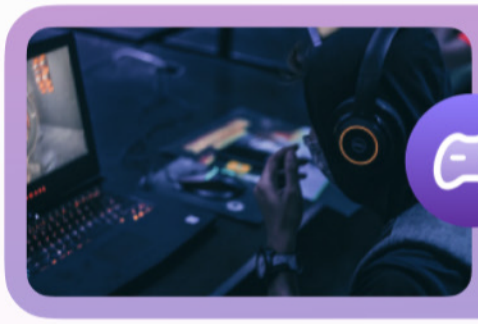

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AT&T SAYS A DATA BREACH LEAKED MILLIONS OF CUSTOMERS' INFORMATION ONLINE. WERE YOU AFFECTED?

The theft of sensitive information belonging to millions of AT&T's current and former customers has been recently discovered online, the telecommunications giant said this weekend.

In an announcement addressing the data breach, AT&T said that a dataset found on the "dark web" contains information including some Social Security numbers and passcodes for about 7.6 million current account holders and 65.4 million former account holders.

Whether the data "originated from AT&T or one of its vendors" is still unknown, the Dallas-based company noted — adding that it had launched

Image: Paul Sancya

an investigation into the incident. AT&T has also begun notifying customers whose personal information was compromised.

Here's what you need to know.

WHAT INFORMATION WAS COMPROMISED IN THIS BREACH?

Although varying by each customer and account, AT&T says that information involved in this breach included Social Security numbers and passcodes — which, unlike passwords, are numerical PINS that are typically four digits long.

Full names, email addresses, mailing address, phone numbers, dates of birth and AT&T account numbers may have also been compromised. The impacted data is from 2019 or earlier and does not appear to include financial information or call history, the company said.

HOW DO I KNOW IF I WAS AFFECTED?

Consumers impacted by this breach should be receiving an email or letter directly from AT&T about the incident. The email notices began going out on Saturday (30), an AT&T spokesperson confirmed.

WHAT ACTION HAS AT&T TAKEN?

Beyond these notifications, AT&T said that it had already reset the passcodes of current users. The company added that it would pay for credit monitoring services where applicable.

AT&T also said that it "launched a robust investigation" with internal and external cybersecurity experts to investigate the situation further.

Image: Mario Anzuoni

HAS AT&T SEEN DATA BREACHES LIKE THIS BEFORE?

AT&T has seen several data breaches that range in size and impact over the years.

While the company says the data in this latest breach surfaced on a hacking forum nearly two weeks ago, it closely resembles a similar breach that surfaced in 2021 but which AT&T never acknowledged, cybersecurity researcher Troy Hunt told.

“If they assess this and they made the wrong call on it, and we’ve had a course of years pass without them being able to notify impacted customers,” then it’s likely the company will soon face class action lawsuits, said Hunt, founder of an Australia-based website that warns people when their personal information has been exposed.

A spokesperson for AT&T declined to comment further when asked about these similarities.

Image: Pau Barrena

12:00
AT&T

HOW CAN I PROTECT MYSELF GOING FORWARD?

Avoiding data breaches entirely can be tricky in our ever-digitized world, but consumers can take some steps to help protect themselves going forward.

The basics include creating hard-to-guess passwords and using multifactor authentication when possible. If you receive a notice about a breach, it's good idea to change your password and monitor account activity for any suspicious transactions. You'll also want to visit a company's official website for reliable contact information — as scammers sometimes try to take advantage of news like data breaches to gain your trust through look-alike phishing emails or phone calls.

In addition, the Federal Trade Commission notes that nationwide credit bureaus — such as Equifax, Experian and TransUnion — offer free credit freezes and fraud alerts that consumers can set up to help protect themselves from identity theft and other malicious activity.

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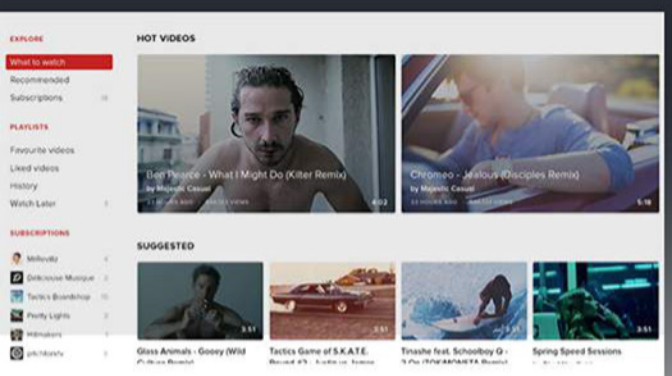

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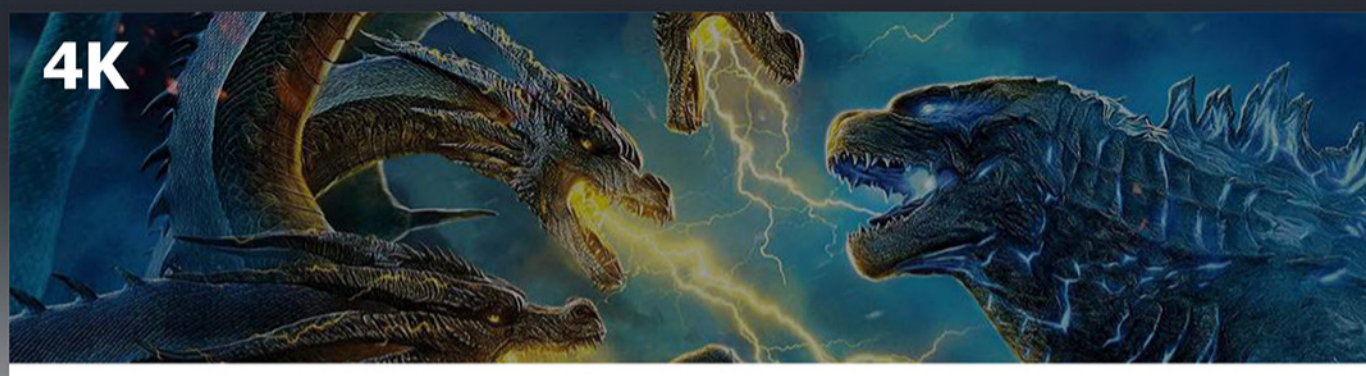

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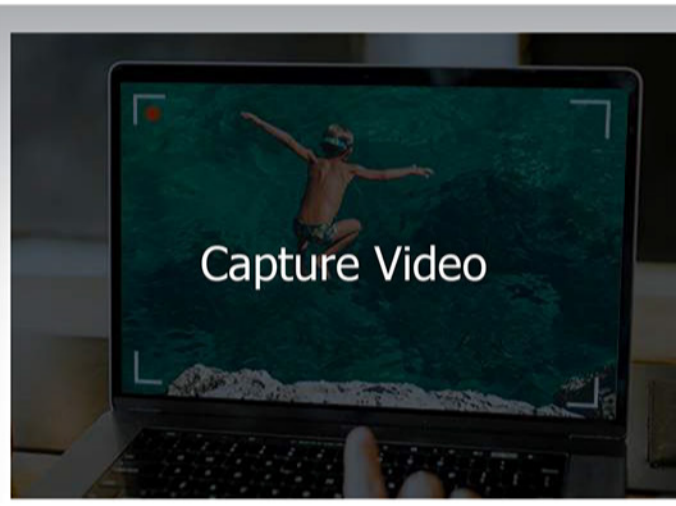

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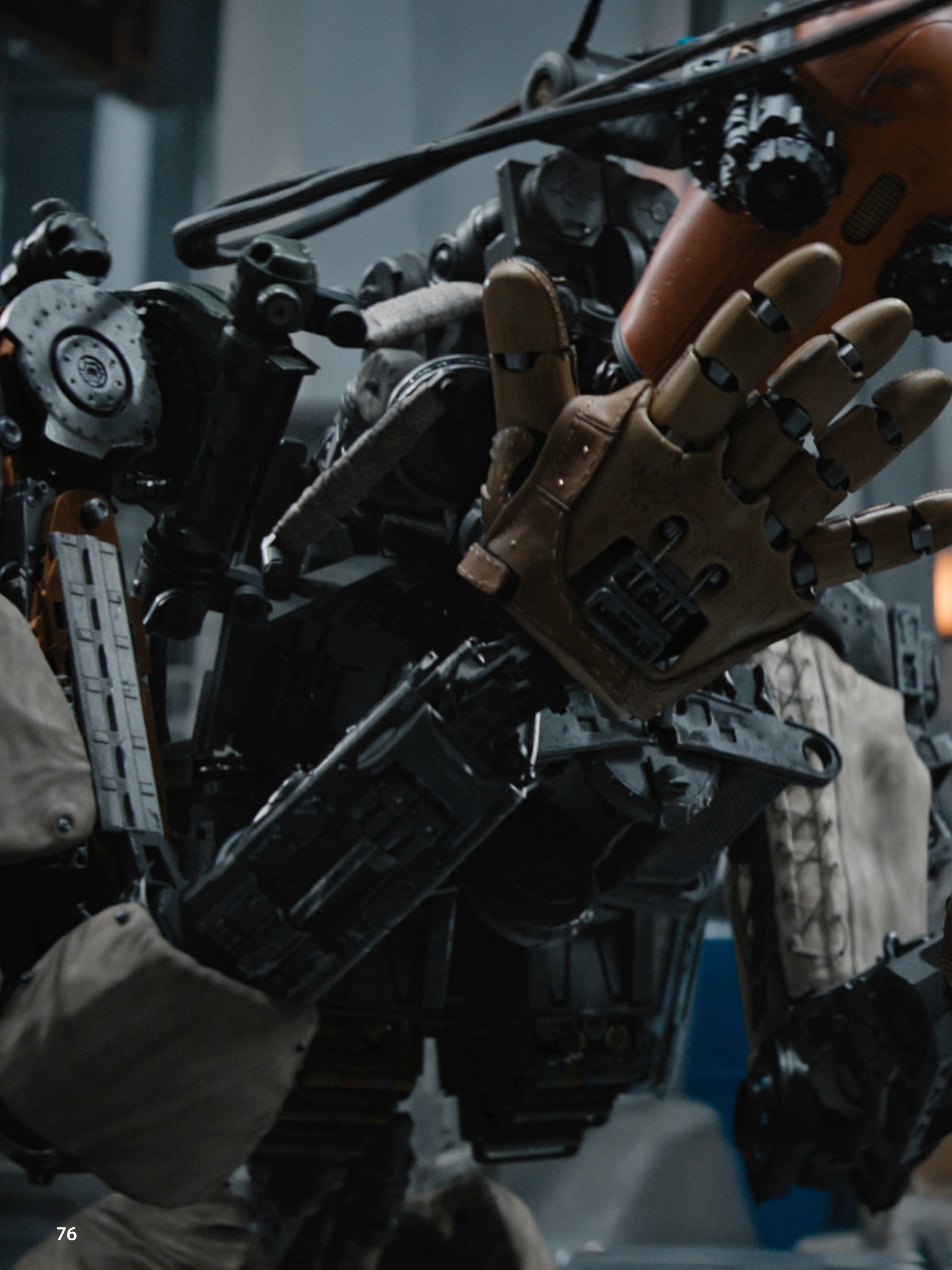
Robotics

AI TECHNOLOGY NOW TURNING SCI-FI INTO INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

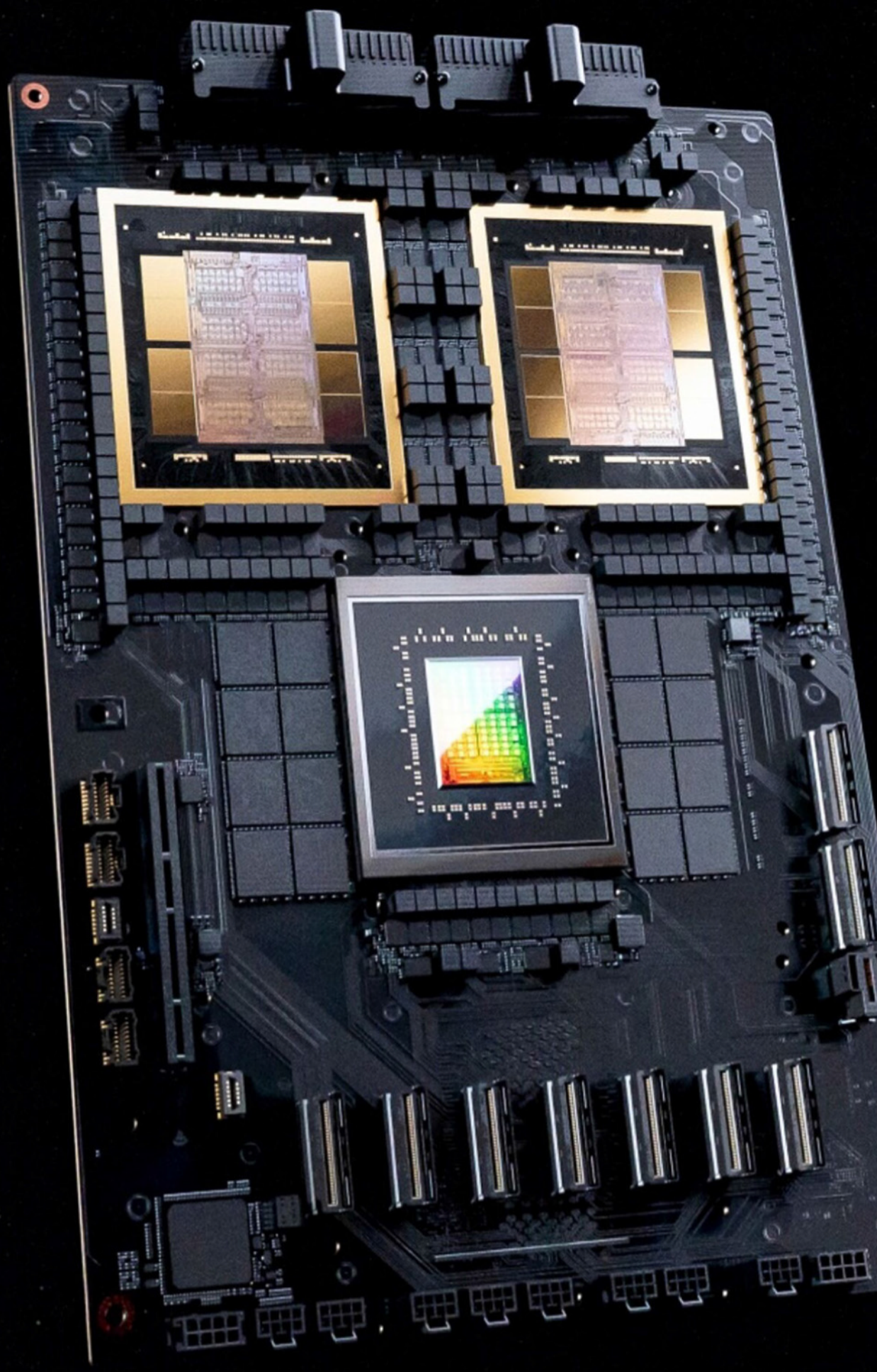
The lines between science fiction and reality continue to blur, and new AI innovations bring the Machine Era closer to reality. The new term “Physical AI” encapsulates the transformative journey we are embarking upon, where artificial intelligence becomes not just a digital force but a physical one, reshaping our world in tangible ways, for better or worse.



BEYOND SCIFI

When we hear "robot," the mind often leaps to dramatic sci-fi scenarios. **Some may look to the Apple TV+ movie Finch**, and **others will consider Black Mirror** as the strange but often realistic future from writer Charlie Brooker begins to play out. The reality is both more profound and more integrated into our daily lives. Robotics has evolved from the realms of science fiction to the factory floors and beyond. These machines, defined by their autonomous operation, are not confined to human-like forms but encompass various designs tailored to diverse tasks. We've already got self-driving vehicles and **automated calls from Google**, and in the years ahead, we're going to see the further rise of what **Nvidia CEO calls "Physical AI".**

From healthcare to home life, manufacturing to military, the scope of robotics is vast. In healthcare, **robots assist in surgeries** deliver supplies, and **even fight pandemics.** Home robots range from vacuuming floors to assisting digital assistants. The manufacturing sector, a pioneer in robotics, utilizes these machines for many tasks, including welding and packaging. In logistics, robots ensure efficiency in warehouses and delivery processes. Space exploration and military applications showcase robots' capabilities in extreme environments, **from Mars rovers to explosive detection units**. Even entertainment and travel are being redefined by robotics, with toy robots and autonomous vehicles now commonplace and no longer the strange, otherworldly beings we were scared of.



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Scales to 576 GPUs

GINE
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SECURE AI
Full Performance
Encryption & TEE

DECOMPRESSION ENGINE
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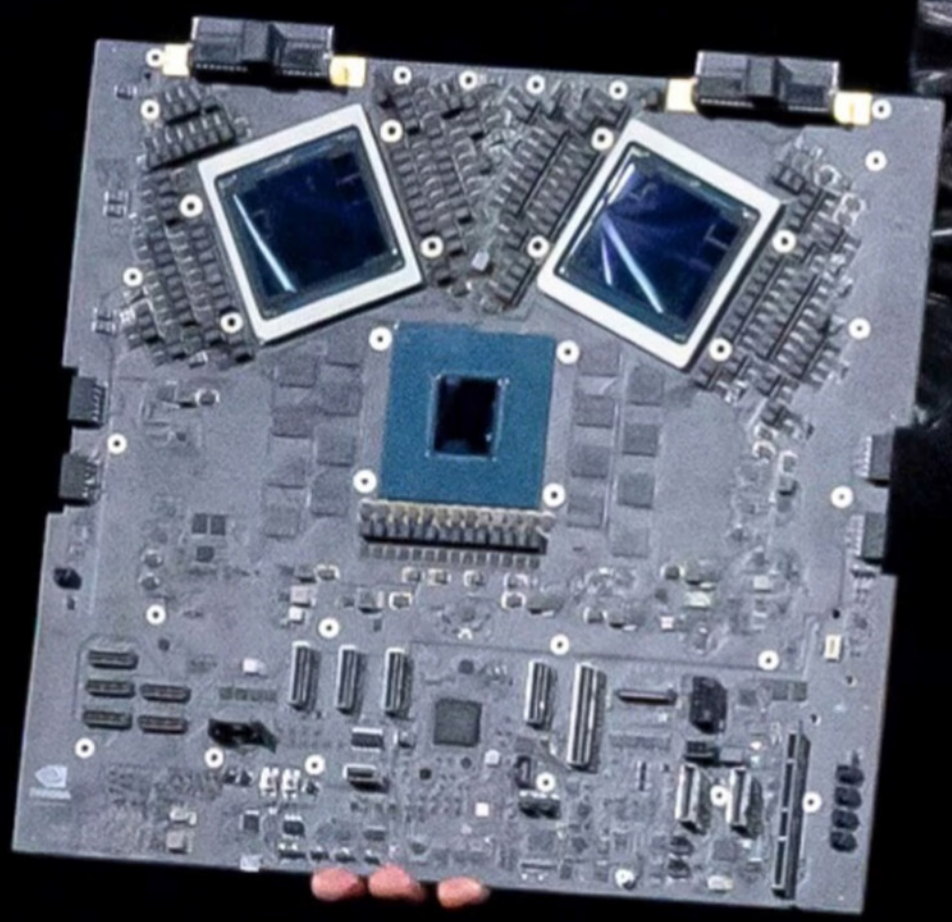
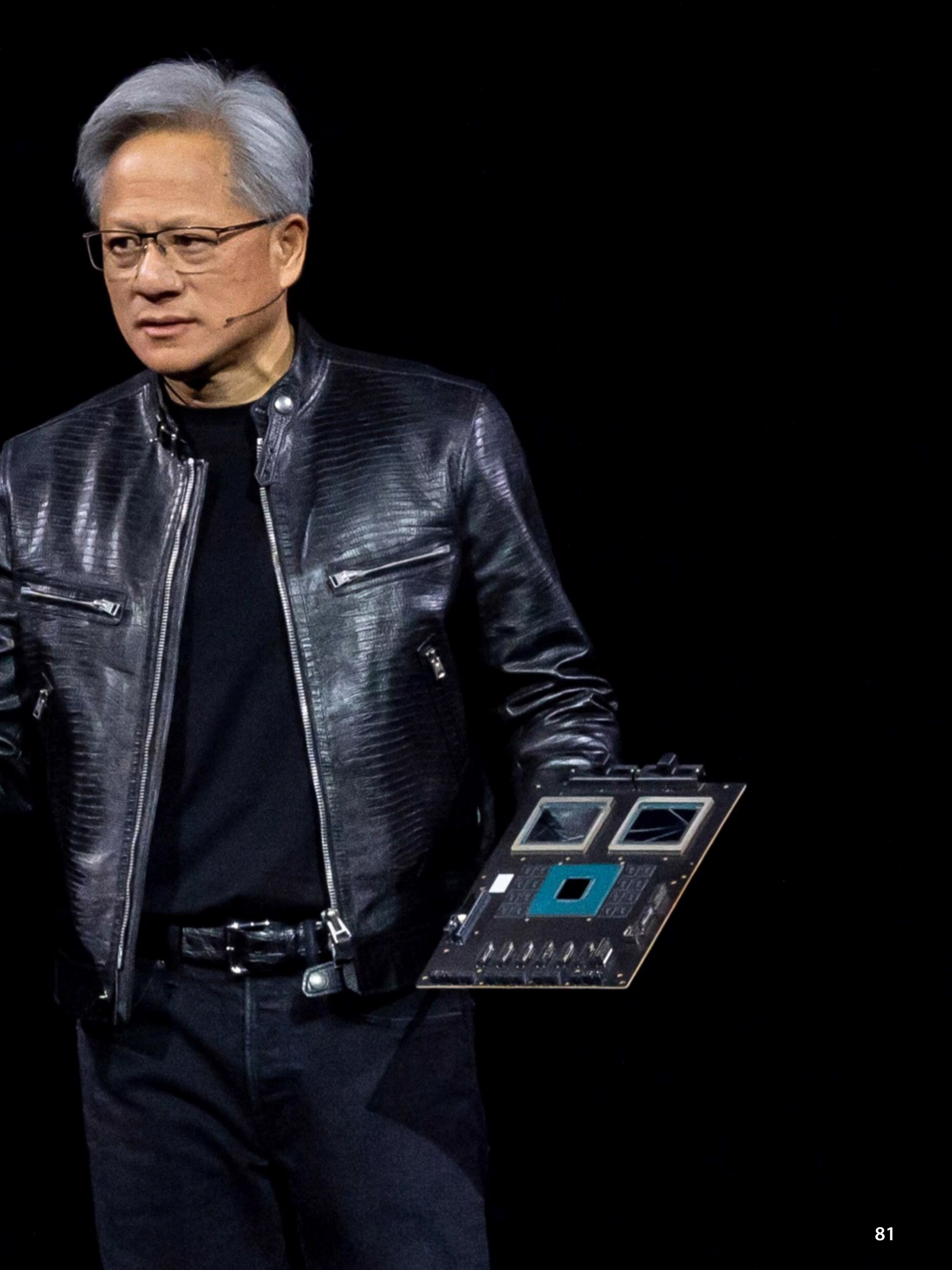
POWERING THE FUTURE WITH BLACKWELL

At the heart of this transformative era is NVIDIA, a company that has become a titan in the AI landscape. NVIDIA's annual revenue for 2024 was $60.922B, a 125.85% increase from 2023, **thanks to the rise of generative AI tools like OpenAI and Google Gemini.** Under the leadership of Jensen Huang, NVIDIA recently unveiled its latest marvel at the GTC conference: **the Blackwell processor.** This processor, named in honor of the trailblazing mathematician David Blackwell, is set to redefine AI computing with its unprecedented speed and capacity.

With its 208 billion transistors, the Blackwell processor is designed to excel in both the development and application of AI models. Its introduction is a testament to NVIDIA's commitment to driving the AI revolution, offering a glimpse into a future where AI's potential is unleashed across industries. This processor is not just an advancement in technology but the foundation for new computers and products that will be **adopted by leading data center operators worldwide for innovations.**

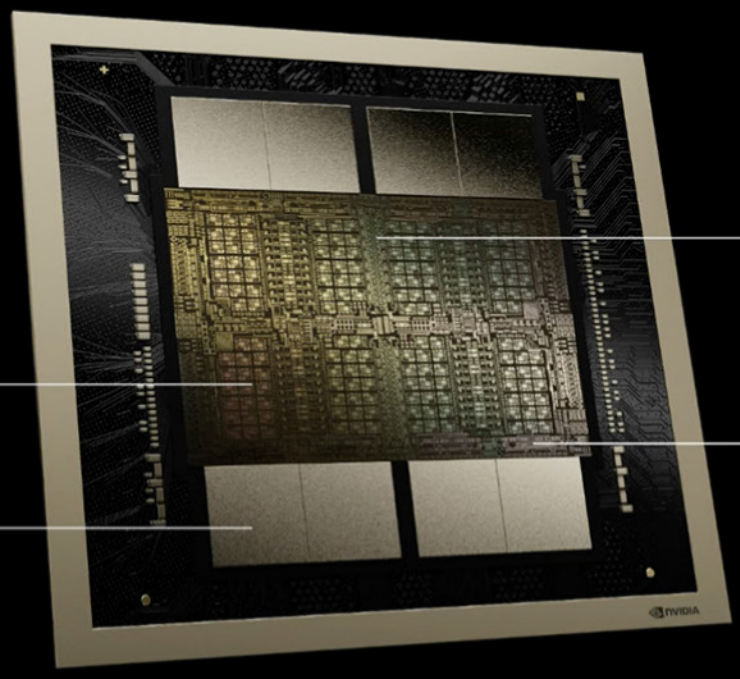
NVIDIA's journey from a graphics card manufacturer beloved by gamers to a pivotal player in AI illustrates a broader trend: the convergence of different technologies to foster innovation. Initially designed for gaming, the company's GPUs have found a new purpose in AI, highlighting the adaptability and potential of NVIDIA's technology. With Blackwell, NVIDIA is not just enhancing AI capabilities but is



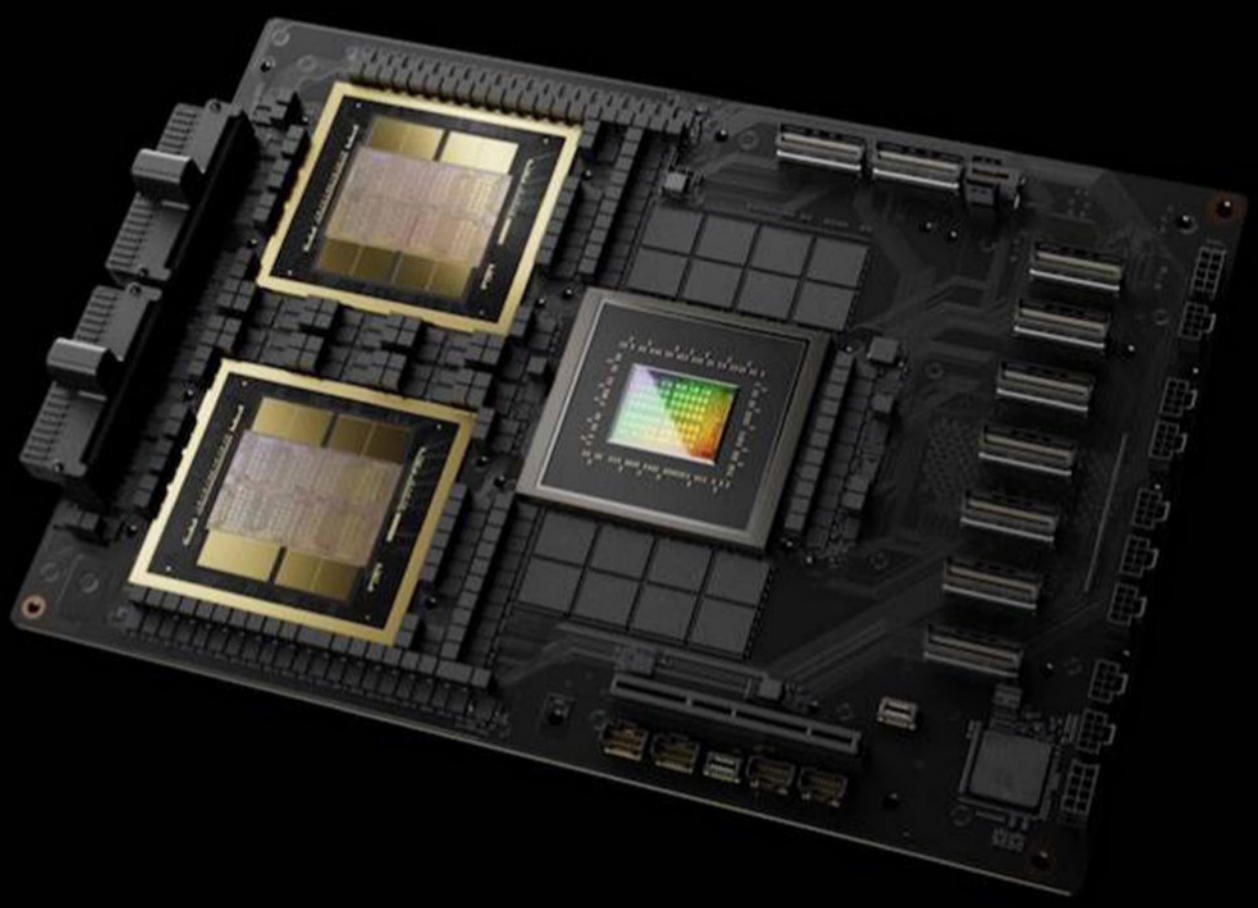


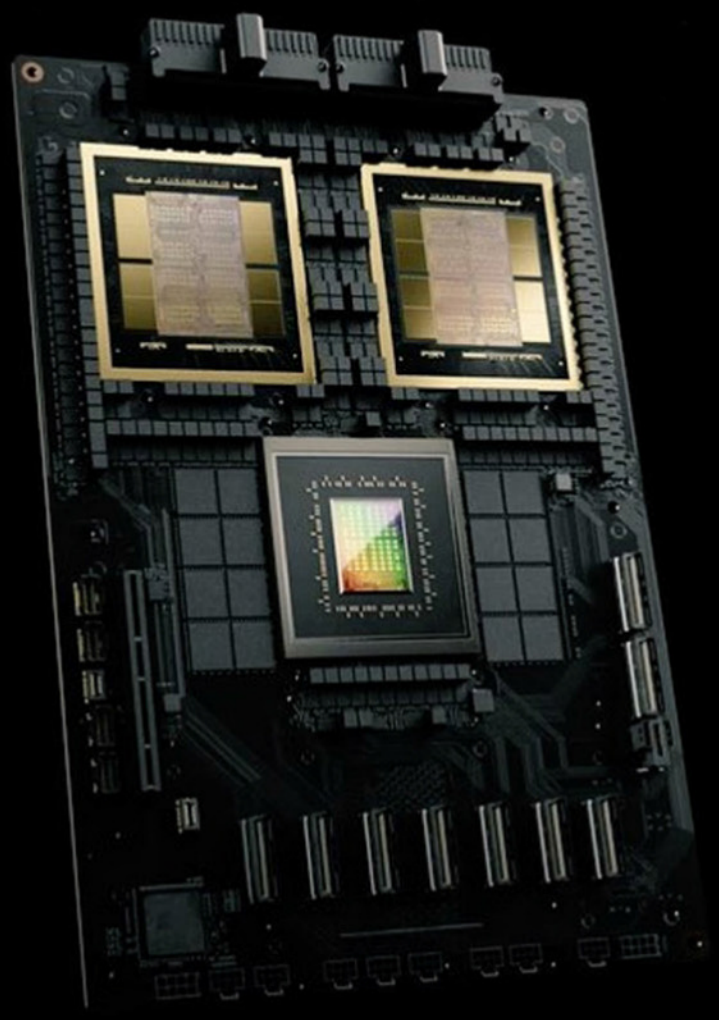
New Class of AI Superchip

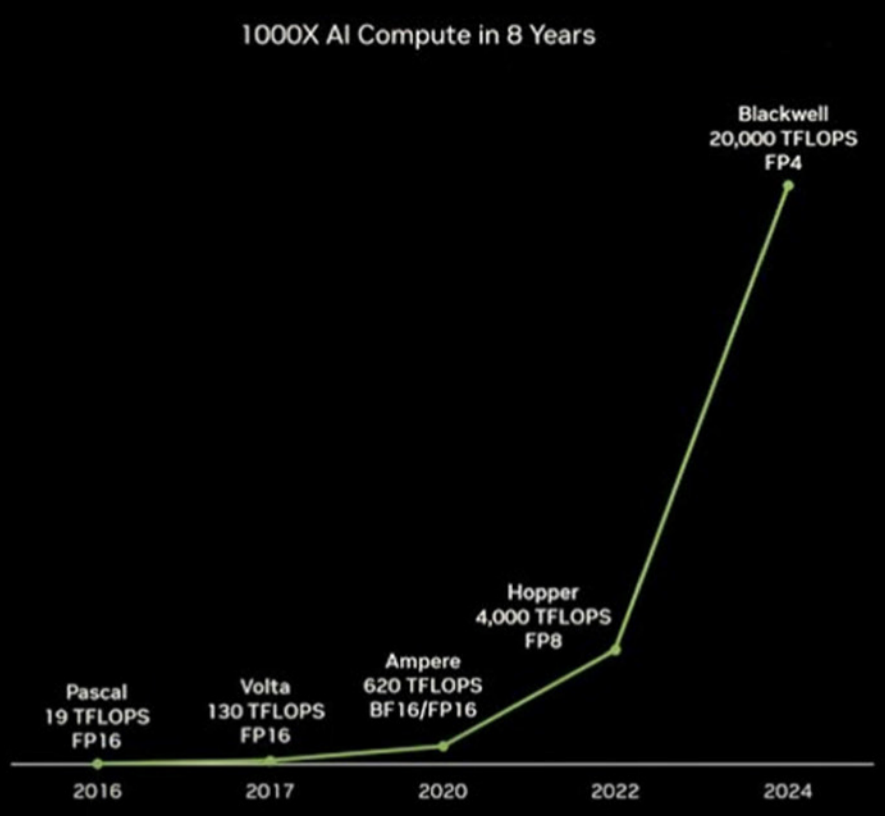
The Two Largest Dies Possible—Unified as One GPU



10 PetaFLOPS FP8 | 20 PetaFLOPS FP4
192GB HBM3e | 8 TB/sec HBM Bandwidth | 1.8TB/s NVLink






1000X AI Compute in 8 Years
Blackwell
20,000 TFLOPS
FP4
Hopper
4,000 TFLOPS
FP8
Ampere
620 TFLOPS
BF16/FP16
Volta
130 TFLOPS
FP16
Pascal
19 TFLOPS
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also addressing the need for integration and ease of use, making AI more accessible to a broader range of industries. One of the most captivating initiatives is **NVIDIA's Omniverse,** a platform that allows the creation of digital twins, offering a bridge between physical and digital realities. From Siemens AG to electric vehicle manufacturers, companies are leveraging Omniverse to revolutionize design, manufacturing, and customer experiences. Moreover, **Project Groot** and collaborations with companies like Johnson & Johnson showcase the potential of Physical AI to enhance humanoid robotics and medical technologies.

NVIDIA's GTC conference was not just a showcase of technological prowess but a proclamation of a new era where **"everything that moves will be robotic."** This vision, underscored by advancements like the Blackwell processor and the Omniverse platform, signifies a future where AI and robotics are not just tools but integral components of our daily lives, reshaping industries, enhancing capabilities, and opening new horizons for innovation and growth. In its recent conference, NVIDIA's **robots were able to stand on their feet** Huang ended his conference by asking two robots to join him on the stage. He revealed that these robots were trained using Nvidia's simulation tools, showcasing the power such "Physical AI" could have in the years ahead. But not all of it will be good.

As we navigate the dawn of the Robot Era, the confluence of AI and robotics heralds a future brimming with possibilities. It's a future where machines complement human endeavors and forge new paths in exploration, creativity, and interaction. But there are challenges ahead, and the future of mankind could be in the hands of computers.

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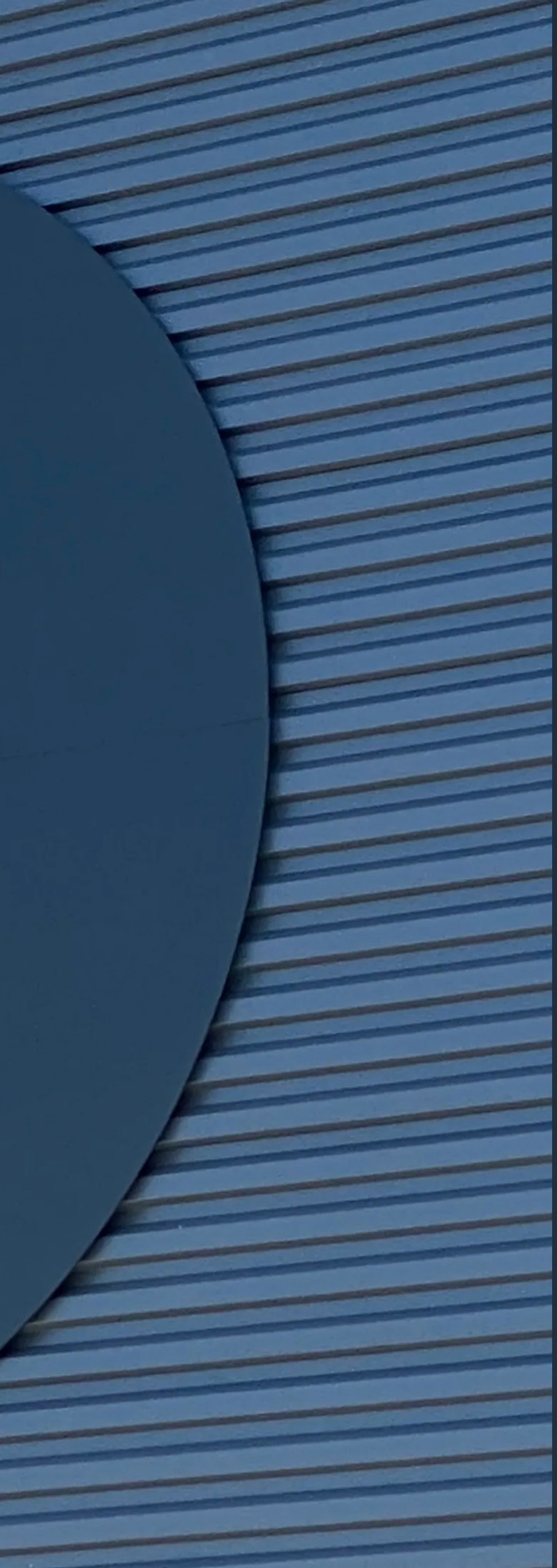

Amazon is removing Just Walk Out technology from its Amazon Fresh stores as part of an effort to revamp the grocery chain.

The company's well-known technology lets customers pay for items without standing in line and sends them receipts afterwards. Amazon says it will now be replaced by smart carts that allow customers to skip the checkout line but also see their spending in real time.

While redesigning Fresh stores in the past year, Amazon spokesperson Carly Golden said the company heard from customers who enjoy skipping the checkout line but also wanted to view their receipts and savings as they shopped. Golden said the smart carts will give customers these benefits as well as the convenience of skipping the checkout line.

Amazon's decision was first reported by The Information.

Seattle-based Amazon operates dozens of Fresh grocery stores across the country, most of which are in California, Illinois, Virginia and Washington state. The company also operates cashier-free convenience stores under the Amazon Go brand and owns Whole Foods, which it purchased in 2017 for $13.7 billion.

Despite predictions Amazon's entry into the grocery sector would disrupt the market, the company has struggled to find what works.

In 2023, Amazon CEO Andy Jassy wrote in his annual letter to shareholders that Amazon was working to find the right formula that will allow it to have a larger impact on physical grocery. The company has shut down some Amazon Fresh and Go stores that weren't living up to

their promise and said early last year that it was pausing expansion on Fresh stores.

In November, the company reopened three Fresh stores in Los Angeles, California. Golden, the Amazon spokesperson, said the company is now focused on "selectively" opening new Fresh stores and remodeling the majority of its existing stores.

Just Walk Out technology will continue to be offered in Amazon Go stores and some smaller Amazon Fresh stores in the U.K., the company said. It will also continue offering the technology to third-party retailers.

amazon go
2131
NO LINES. NO CHECKOUT.
(NO. SERIOUSLY.)
JUST WALK OUT SHOPPING
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Now open!
amazon go

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Image: Seth Wenig

GOOGLE TO PURGE BILLIONS OF FILES CONTAINING PERSONAL DATA IN SETTLEMENT OF CHROME PRIVACY CASE

Google has agreed to purge billions of records containing personal information collected from more than 136 million people in the U.S. surfing the internet through its Chrome web browser.

The records purge comes as part of a settlement in a lawsuit accusing the search giant of illegal surveillance.

The details of the deal emerged in a court filing this week, more than three months after Google and the attorneys handling the class-action case disclosed they had resolved a June 2020 lawsuit targeting Chrome's privacy controls.

Among other allegations, the lawsuit accused Google of tracking Chrome users' internet activity even when they had switched the browser to the "Incognito" setting that is supposed to shield them from being shadowed by the Mountain View, California, company.

Google vigorously fought the lawsuit until U.S. District Judge Yvonne Gonzalez Rogers rejected a request to dismiss the case last August, setting up a potential trial. The settlement was negotiated during the next four months, culminating in the disclosure of the terms, which Rogers still must approve during a hearing scheduled for July 30 in Oakland, California, federal court.

The settlement requires Google to expunge billions of personal records stored in its data centers and make more prominent privacy disclosures about Chrome's Incognito option when it is activated. It also imposes other controls designed to limit Google's collection of personal information.

Consumers represented in the class-action lawsuit won't receive any damages or any other payments in the settlement, a point that Google emphasized in a statement about the deal.

Image: Steve Marcus

"We are pleased to settle this lawsuit, which we always believed was meritless," Google said. The company asserted it is only being required to "delete old personal technical data that was never associated with an individual and was never used for any form of personalization."

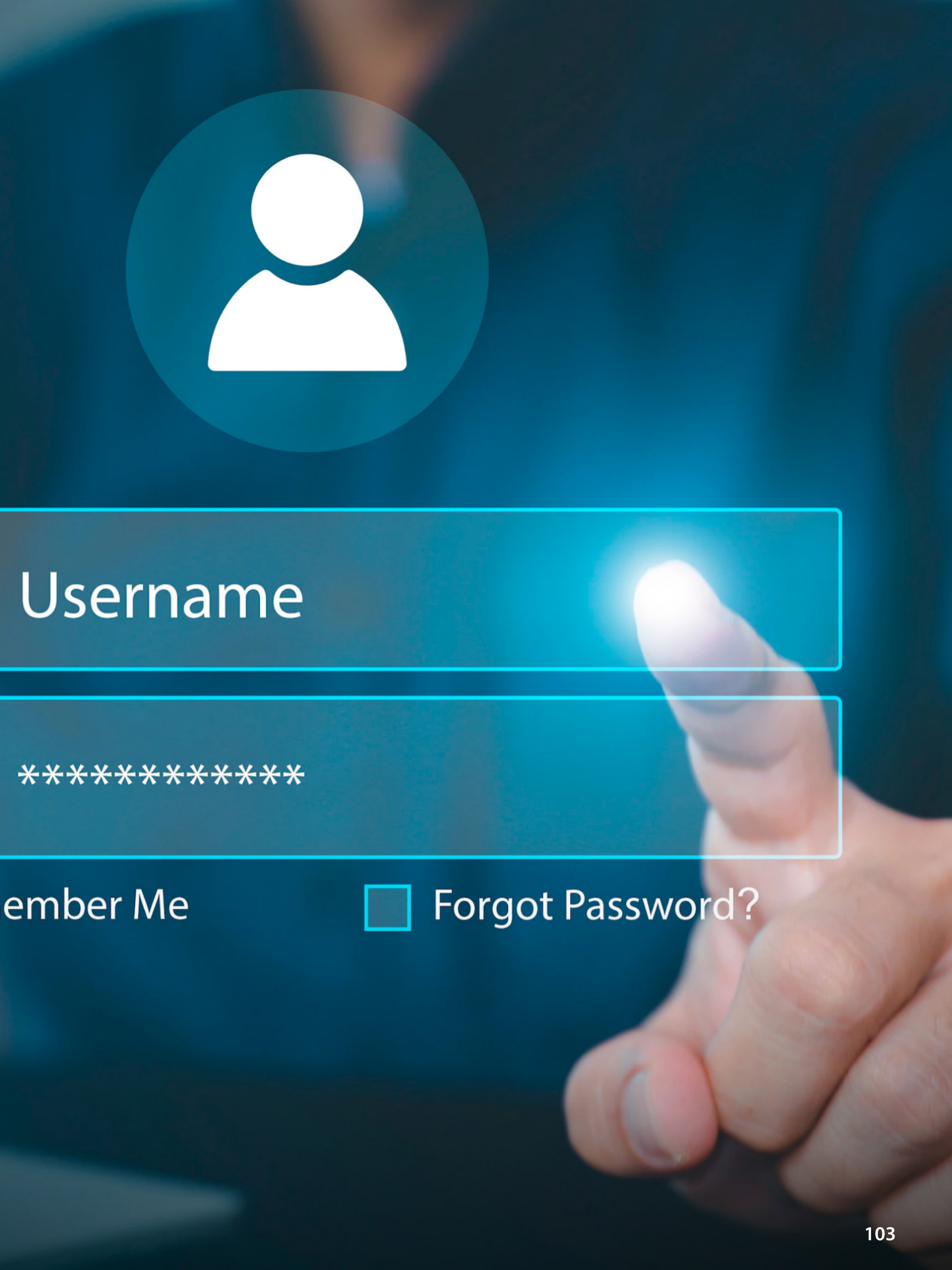
In court papers, the attorneys representing Chrome users painted a much different picture, depicting the settlement as a major victory for personal privacy in an age of ever-increasing digital surveillance.

The lawyers valued the settlement at $4.75 billion to $7.8 billion, relying on calculations based primarily on the potential ad sales that the personal information collected through Chrome could have generated in the past and future without the new restrictions.

The settlement also doesn't shield Google from more lawsuits revolving around the same issues covered in the class-action case. That means individual consumers can still pursue damages against the company by filing their own civil complaints in state courts around the U.S.

Investors apparently aren't too worried about the settlement terms affecting the digital ad sales that account for the bulk of the more than $300 billion in annual revenue pouring into Google's corporate parent, Alphabet Inc. Shares in Alphabet rose nearly 3% after the announcement.

Austin Chambers, a lawyer specializing in data privacy issues at the firm Dorsey & Whitney, described the settlement terms in the Chrome case as a "welcome development" that could affect the way personal information is collected online in the future.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"This prevents companies from profiting off of that data, and also requires them to undertake complex and costly data deletion efforts," Chambers said. "In some cases, this could have a dramatic impact on products built around those datasets."

Google is still facing legal threats on the regulatory frontier that could have a far bigger impact on its business, depending on the outcomes.

After the U.S. Justice Department outlined its allegations that the company is abusing the dominance of its search engine to thwart competition and innovation during a trial last fall, a federal judge is scheduled to hear closing arguments in the case May 1 before issuing a ruling anticipated in the autumn.

Google is also facing potential changes to its app store for smartphones powered by its Android software that could undercut its revenue from commissions after a federal jury last year concluded the company was running an illegal monopoly. A hearing examining possible revisions that Google may have to make to its Play Store is scheduled for late May.

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ELON MUSK'S X HAS A NEW SAFETY LEADER, NINE MONTHS AFTER PREDECESSOR LEFT THE SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORM

Elon Musk's X, the platform formerly known as Twitter, has named a new head of safety nine months after the last executive to hold the position departed from the social media company.

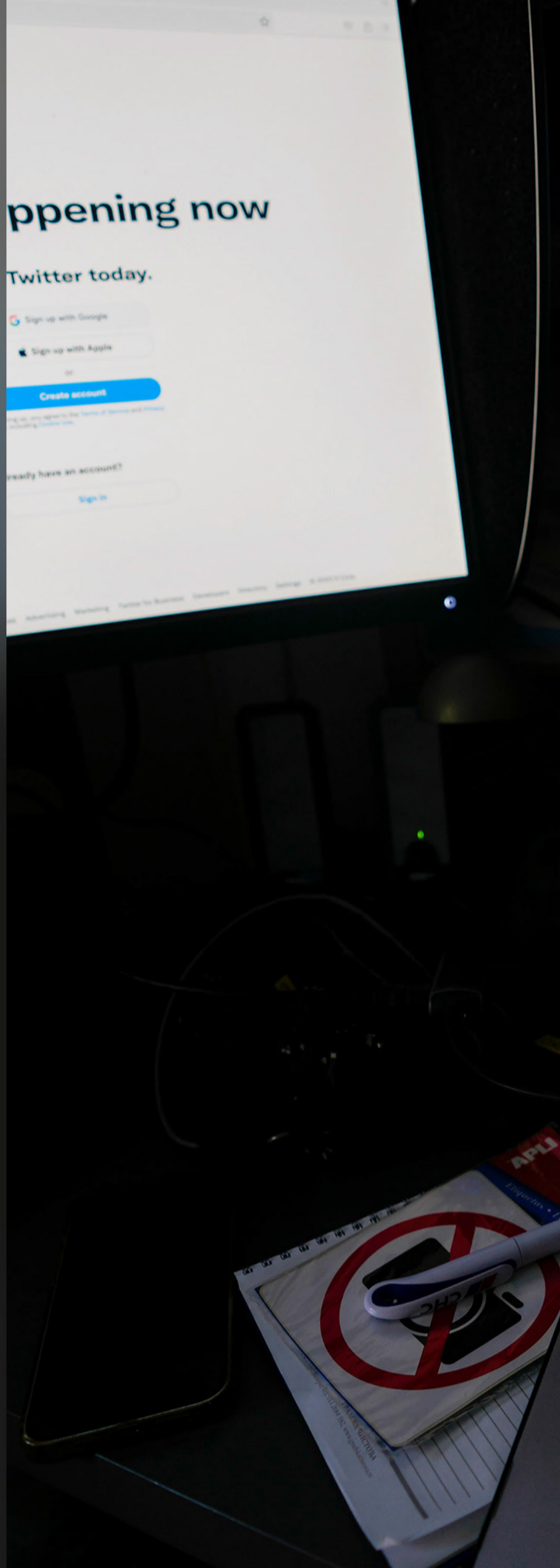
X said that company veteran Kylie McRoberts will oversee the global safety team. The platform also announced that Yale Cohen, who previously worked for media firm Publicis Media, would become head of brand safety and advertiser solutions.

The last executive heading what was formerly called the trust and safety team, Ella Irwin, left the company in June 2023. While Irwin did not point to specific reasoning at the time, her resignation arrived just days after Musk publicly complained about the platform's handling of posts about transgender topics.

Since Musk's $44 billion purchase of the platform in October 2022, X has seen several leadership shakeups.

The appointments, first announced Tuesday, arrive amid ongoing concerns about content moderation on X as well as the spread of misinformation and hate speech on the platform, which some researchers say has been on the rise under Musk.

The issue has driven away some big-name advertisers. In November, brands including IBM, NBCUniversal and its parent company Comcast, said that they stopped advertising on X after a report from the liberal advocacy group Media Matters said their ads were appearing alongside material praising Nazis. It was yet another setback as X tries to win



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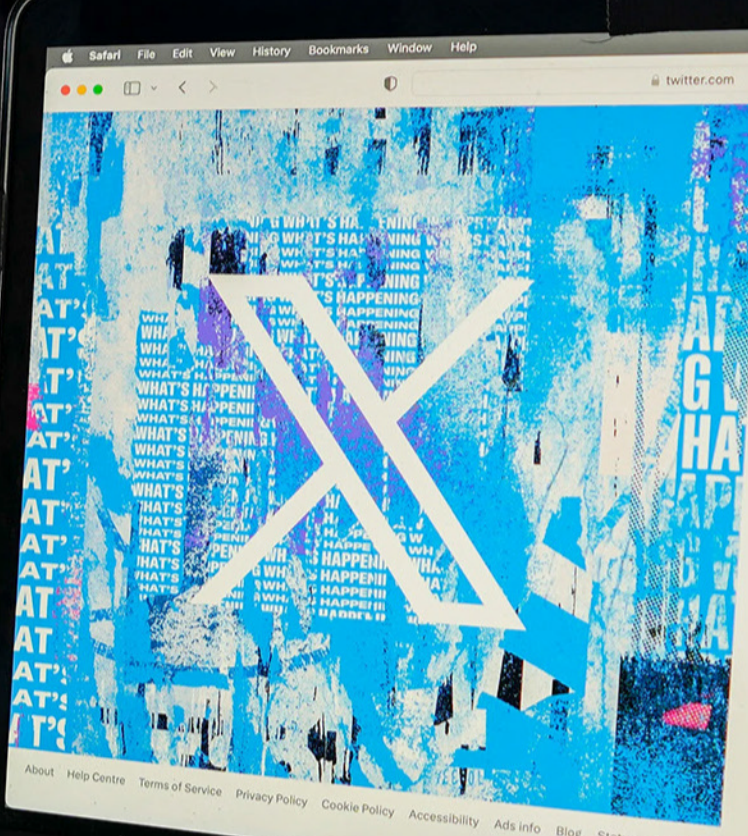

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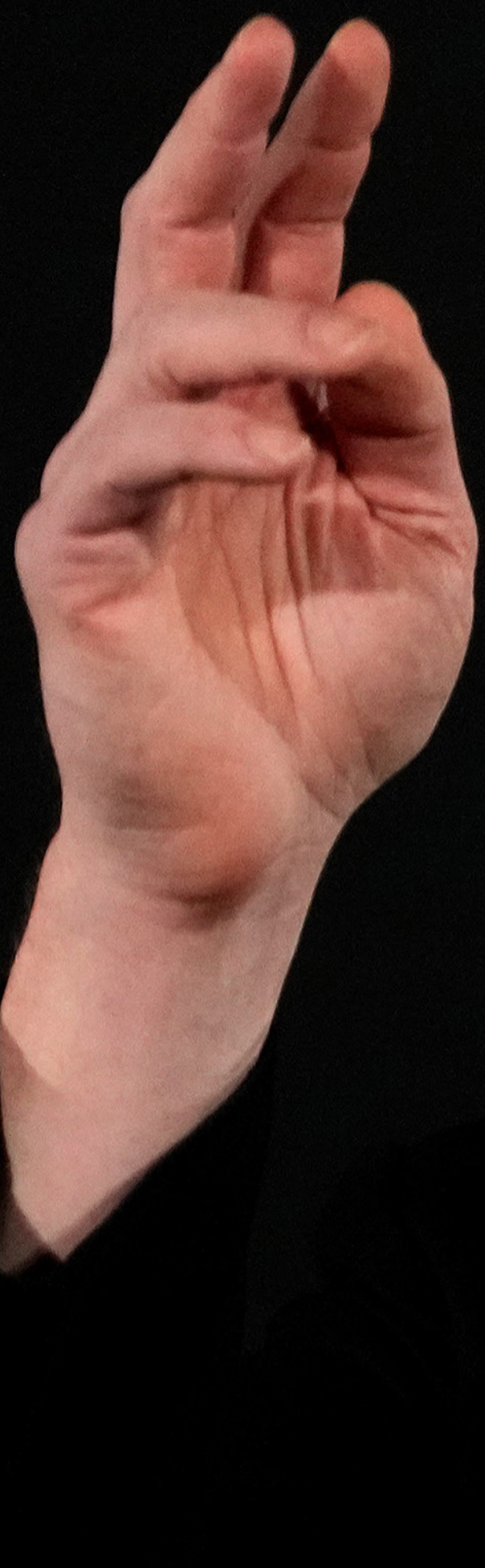
MacBook Pro

back big brands and their ad dollars, X's main source of revenue.

Later that month, Musk went on an expletive-ridden rant in response to companies that had halted spending on X in response to antisemitic and other hateful material, accusing them of "blackmail" and, using a profanity, essentially told them to go away.

Beyond advertiser battles, X has also attempted to some sue those who have documented the proliferation of hate speech on the platform — including Media Matters and the non-profit Center for Countering Digital Hate. A federal judge dismissed the suit against the center last week, ruling that X cannot seek damages for the independent acts of third parties based on the nonprofit's reports, or its "speech."



SCATHING FEDERAL REPORT RIPS MICROSOFT FOR SHODDY SECURITY, INSINCERITY IN RESPONSE TO CHINESE HACK

rosoft

In a scathing indictment of Microsoft corporate security and transparency, a Biden administration-appointed review board issued a report this week saying "a cascade of errors" by the tech giant let state-backed Chinese cyber operators break into email accounts of senior U.S. officials including Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo.

The Cyber Safety Review Board, created in 2021 by executive order, describes shoddy cybersecurity practices, a lax corporate culture and a lack of sincerity about the company's knowledge of the targeted breach, which affected multiple U.S. agencies that deal with China.

It concluded that "Microsoft's security culture was inadequate and requires an overhaul" given the company's ubiquity and critical role in the global technology ecosystem. Microsoft products "underpin essential services that support national security, the foundations of our economy, and public health and safety."

The panel said the intrusion, discovered in June by the State Department and dating to May "was preventable and should never have occurred," blaming its success on "a cascade of avoidable errors." What's more, the board said, Microsoft still doesn't know how the hackers got in.

The panel made sweeping recommendations, including urging Microsoft to put on hold adding features to its cloud computing environment until "substantial security improvements have been made."

It said Microsoft's CEO and board should institute "rapid cultural change" including publicly sharing "a plan with specific timelines

to make fundamental, security-focused reforms across the company and its full suite of products."

In a statement, Microsoft said it appreciated the board's investigation and would "continue to harden all our systems against attack and implement even more robust sensors and logs to help us detect and repel the cyber-armies of our adversaries."

In all, the state-backed Chinese hackers broke into the Microsoft Exchange Online email of 22 organizations and more than 500 individuals around the world including the U.S. ambassador to China, Nicholas Burns — accessing some cloud-based email boxes for at least six weeks and downloading some 60,000 emails from the State Department alone, the 34-page report said. Three think tanks and foreign government entities, including a number of British organizations, were among those compromised, it said.

The board, convened by Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas in August, accused Microsoft of making inaccurate public statements about the incident — including issuing a statement saying it believed it had determined the likely root cause of the intrusion "when, in fact, it still has not." Microsoft did not update that misleading blog post, published in September, until mid-March after the board repeatedly asked if it planned to issue a correction, it said.

Separately, the board expressed concern about a separate hack disclosed by the Redmond, Washington, company in January — this one of email accounts including those of

an undisclosed number of senior Microsoft executives and an undisclosed number of Microsoft customers and attributed to state-backed Russian hackers.

The board lamented "a corporate culture that deprioritized both enterprise security investments and rigorous risk management."

The Chinese hack was initially disclosed in July by Microsoft in a blog post and carried out by a group the company calls Storm-0558. That same group, the panel noted, has been engaged in similar intrusions — compromising cloud providers or stealing authentication keys so it can break into accounts — since at least 2009, targeting companies including Google, Yahoo, Adobe, Dow Chemical and Morgan Stanley.

Microsoft noted in its statement that the hackers involved are "well-resourced nation state threat actors who operate continuously and without meaningful deterrence."

The company said it recognizes that recent events "have demonstrated a need to adopt a new culture of engineering security in our own networks," adding it has "mobilized our engineering teams to identify and mitigate legacy infrastructure, improve processes, and enforce security benchmarks."

PARTMENT OF
AND SECURITY

US FIRST-QUARTER AUTO SALES GREW NEARLY 5% DESPITE HIGH INTEREST RATES, BUT EV GROWTH SLOWS FURTHER

New vehicle sales in the U.S. rose nearly 5% from January through March, as buyers stayed in the market despite high interest rates. But electric vehicle sales growth slowed during the first three months of the year, with mainstream buyers wary of limited range and a lack of charging stations.

Automakers, most of which reported U.S. sales numbers this week, sold nearly 3.8 million vehicles in the first quarter versus a year ago, for an annual rate of 15.4 million in sales.

Image: David Zalubowski

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DENVER

With inventory on dealer lots growing toward pre-pandemic levels, auto companies were forced to reduce prices. J.D. Power said the average sales price in March was $44,186, down 3.6% from a year ago and the largest recorded decline for the month of March.

The company said automaker discounts in March were two-thirds higher than a year ago, around $2,800. That includes increased availability of lease deals. J.D. Power expected leases to account for almost a quarter of retail sales last month, up from 19.6% in March of last year.

Sales of electric vehicles grew only 2.7% to just over 268,000 during the quarter, far below the 47% growth that fueled record sales and a 7.6% market share last year. The slowdown, led by Tesla, confirms automakers' fears that they moved too quickly to pursue EV buyers. The EV share of total U.S. sales fell to 7.1% in the first quarter.

Nearly all of the early adopters and people concerned about internal-combustion engines' impact on the planet have bought electric vehicles, and now automakers are facing more skeptical mainstream buyers, Edmunds Director of Insights Ivan Drury said.

"That's where all of those headwinds come in that we've seen in survey data," Drury said. "Those real-world concerns about charging infrastructure, battery life, insurance costs."

Cox Automotive Chief Economist Jonathan Smoke cautioned it appears the industry has already hit its spring sales peak as buyers expect the Federal Reserve to cut interest rates later in the year.

"Interest rates are still near 24-year highs, and consumers just don't have the urgency to buy,

SUMITOMO ELECTRIC

with the expectation that rates will be lower later this year," he wrote in a market report. Automobile interest rates still are averaging around 7% per year.

Drury said vehicles that are more affordable are selling faster than more expensive ones. Sales of many large and expensive SUVs fell during the quarter as companies faced more frugal buyers.

"Small sells, whether it be size or the sales price," Drury said.

For example, General Motors' Chevrolet brand sold 37,588 Trax small SUVs in the quarter, more than a fivefold increase from a year ago. By itself, the Trax, which starts around $21,500, outsold the entire Cadillac brand.

Most automakers reported strong year-over-year sales increases from January through March, but General Motors, Stellantis, Kia and Tesla all reported declines.

GM, the top-selling automaker in the U.S., reported that sales were down 1.5% for the quarter, while Stellantis sales were off nearly 10%. Kia sales were down 2.5%. All three companies reported strong first-quarter sales a year ago.

Toyota reported a large sales increase, 20%, for the quarter, and said combined sales of its hybrids and lone electric vehicle rose 36%. Honda said its sales increased 17%, while Nissan and Subaru both posted 7% increases. Hyundai reported an increase of just 0.2%.

TESLA

Tesla sales fell sharply last quarter as competition increased worldwide, electric

vehicle sales growth slowed, and price cuts failed to lure more buyers.

The Austin, Texas, company said that it delivered 386,810 vehicles worldwide from January through March, almost 9% below the 423,000 it sold in the same quarter of last year. It was the first year-over-year quarterly sales decline in nearly four years.

Sales also fell short of even the most bearish Wall Street expectations. Auto industry analysts polled by FactSet were looking for 457,000 vehicle deliveries from Tesla Inc. That's a shortfall of more than 15%.

The company blamed the decline in part on phasing in an updated version of the Model 3 sedan at its Fremont, California, factory, plant shutdowns due to shipping diversions in the Red Sea, and an arson attack that knocked out power to its German factory.

But TD Cowen Analyst Jeffrey Osborne wrote in a note to investors that weaker March sales indicate that incentives, including discounts and a free trial of "Full Self Driving" software, "did not work as demand deteriorated."

Despite the sales decline, Tesla was able to retake its global EV sales crown from China's BYD, which sold just over 300,000 electric vehicles during the quarter, Osborne wrote.

In its letter to investors in January, Tesla predicted "notably lower" sales growth this year. The letter said Tesla is between two big growth waves, one from global expansion of the Models 3 and Y, and a second coming from the Model 2, a new, smaller and less expensive vehicle with an unknown release date.

Image: Mario Tama

"This was an unmitigated disaster 1Q that is hard to explain away," wrote Dan Ives, an analyst with Wedbush who has been very bullish on Tesla's stock. The drop in sales was far worse than expected, he wrote in a note to investors.

The quarter is a "seminal moment" in the Tesla growth story, Ives wrote, adding that CEO Elon Musk will have to turn the company around. "Otherwise, some darker days could clearly be ahead that could disrupt the long-term Tesla narrative."

Ives maintained his Outperform rating on Tesla's shares and cut his one-year price target from $315 to $300. Ives estimated that China sales slid 3% to 4% during the period.

"Street criticism is warranted as growth has been sluggish and (profit) margins showing compression, with China a horror show and competition increasing from all angles," Ives wrote.

Tesla dramatically lowered U.S. prices by up to $20,000 for some models last year. In March it temporarily knocked $1,000 off the Model Y, its top-selling vehicle. Those price cuts narrowed the company's profit margins and spooked investors.

Analysts polled by FactSet expected the average selling price for Model Y to be $41,000 last quarter, $5,000 less than a year ago and $15,000 lower than the peak of $56,000 in June of 2022.

Tesla's sales numbers also pulled down shares of its U.S. EV competitors. Shares of Rivian fell 5.2%, while Lucid stock dropped 3.5%.

Deliveries of the Models 3 and Y, fell 10.3% year over year to 369,783. Sales of the company's other models, the aging X and S and the new

Cybertruck, rose almost 60% to 17,027. Tesla produced 10.7% more vehicles than it sold during the first quarter.

Softer-than-expected first-quarter sales are reducing analyst expectations for Tesla's quarterly earnings ahead of their scheduled release on April 23.

Tesla's sales come against the backdrop of a slowing market for electric vehicles in the U.S. EV sales grew 47% last year to a record 1.19 million as EV market share rose to 7.6%. But sales growth slowed toward the end of the year. In December, they rose 34%.

GMAIL REVOLUTIONIZED EMAIL 20 YEARS AGO. PEOPLE THOUGHT IT WAS GOOGLE'S APRIL FOOLS' DAY JOKE

Google co-founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin loved pulling pranks, so much so they began rolling outlandish ideas every April Fools' Day not long after starting their company more than a quarter century ago. One year, Google posted a job opening for a Copernicus research center on the moon. Another year, the company said it planned to roll out a "scratch and sniff" feature on its search engine.

The jokes were so consistently over-the-top that people learned to laugh them off as another

Gmail

example of Google mischief. And that's why Page and Brin decided to unveil something no one would believe was possible 20 years ago on April Fools' Day.

It was Gmail, a free service boasting 1 gigabyte of storage per account, an amount that sounds almost pedestrian in an age of one-terabyte iPhones. But it sounded like a preposterous amount of email capacity back then, enough to store about 13,500 emails before running out of space compared to just 30 to 60 emails in the then-leading webmail services run by Yahoo and Microsoft. That translated into 250 to 500 times more email storage space.

Besides the quantum leap in storage, Gmail also came equipped with Google's search technology so users could quickly retrieve a tidbit from an old email, photo or other personal information stored on the service. It also automatically threaded together a string of communications about the same topic so everything flowed together as if it was a single conversation.

"The original pitch we put together was all about the three 'S's" — storage, search and speed," said former Google executive Marissa Mayer, who helped design Gmail and other company products before later becoming Yahoo's CEO.

It was such a mind-bending concept that shortly after a story published about Gmail late on the afternoon of April Fools' 2004, readers began calling and emailing to inform the news agency it had been duped by Google's pranksters.

"That was part of the charm, making a product that people won't believe is real. It kind of changed people's perceptions about the kinds

by
www.gmail.

of applications that were possible within a web browser," former Google engineer Paul Buchheit recalled during a recent AP interview about his efforts to build Gmail.

It took three years to do as part of a project called "Caribou" — a reference to a running gag in the Dilbert comic strip. "There was something sort of absurd about the name Caribou, it just made make me laugh," said Buchheit, the 23rd employee hired at a company that now employs more than 180,000 people.

The AP knew Google wasn't joking about Gmail because an AP reporter had been abruptly asked to come down from San Francisco to the company's Mountain View, California, headquarters to see something that would make the trip worthwhile.

After arriving at a still-developing corporate campus that would soon blossom into what became known as the "Googleplex," the AP reporter was ushered into a small office where Page was wearing an impish grin while sitting in front of his laptop computer.

Page, then just 31 years old, proceeded to show off Gmail's sleekly designed inbox and demonstrated how quickly it operated within Microsoft's now-retired Explorer web browser. And he pointed out there was no delete button featured in the main control window because it wouldn't be necessary, given Gmail had so much storage and could be so easily searched. "I think people are really going to like this," Page predicted.

As with so many other things, Page was right. Gmail now has an estimated 1.8 billion active accounts — each one now offering 15 gigabytes

of free storage bundled with Google Photos and Google Drive. Even though that's 15 times more storage than Gmail initially offered, it's still not enough for many users who rarely see the need to purge their accounts, just as Google hoped.

The digital hoarding of email, photos and other content is why Google, Apple and other companies now make money from selling additional storage capacity in their data centers. (In Google's case, it charges anywhere from $30 annually for 200 gigabytes of storage to $250 annually for 5 terabytes of storage). Gmail's existence is also why other free email services and the internal email accounts that employees use on their jobs offer far more storage than was fathomed 20 years ago.

"We were trying to shift the way people had been thinking because people were working in this model of storage scarcity for so long that deleting became a default action," Buchheit said.

Gmail was a game changer in several other ways while becoming the first building block in the expansion of Google's internet empire beyond its still-dominant search engine.

After Gmail came Google Maps and Google Docs with word processing and spreadsheet applications. Then came the acquisition of video site YouTube, followed by the introduction of the the Chrome browser and the Android operating system that powers most of the world's smartphones. With Gmail's explicitly stated intention to scan the content of emails to get a better understanding of users' interests, Google also left little doubt that digital surveillance in pursuit of selling more ads would be part of its expanding ambitions.

Although it immediately generated a buzz, Gmail started out with a limited scope because Google initially only had enough computing capacity to support a small audience of users.

"When we launched, we only had 300 machines and they were really old machines that no one else wanted," Buchheit said, with a chuckle. "We only had enough capacity for 10,000 users, which is a little absurd."

But that scarcity created an air of exclusivity around Gmail that drove feverish demand for an elusive invitations to sign up. At one point, invitations to open a Gmail account were selling for $250 apiece on eBay. "It became a bit like a social currency, where people would go, 'Hey, I got a Gmail invite, you want one?'" Buchheit said.

Although signing up for Gmail became increasingly easier as more of Google's network of massive data centers came online, the company didn't begin accepting all comers to the email service until it opened the floodgates as a Valentine's Day present to the world in 2007.

A few weeks later on April Fools' Day in 2007, Google would announce a new feature called "Gmail Paper" offering users the chance to have Google print out their email archive on "94% post-consumer organic soybean sputum " and then have it sent to them through the Postal Service. Google really was joking around that time.

WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT NEXT WEEK'S TOTAL SOLAR ECLIPSE IN THE US, MEXICO AND CANADA

INDIANA
3m 46s
LITTL
ZARAGOZA, MEXICO
4m 27s
DALLAS
3m 47s
MAZATLÁN, MEXICO
4m 14s

North America is on the verge of another masking of the sun.

Monday's total solar eclipse will make landfall along Mexico's Pacific coast and cross into Texas and 14 other U.S. states, before exiting over Canada.

It will last almost twice as long, with an even wider audience, than the total solar eclipse that stretched coast-to-coast in the U.S. in 2017.

The moon will shroud the sun for up to 4 minutes, 28 seconds, a spectacle normally unfolding in remote corners of the globe but this time passing over major cities like Dallas, Indianapolis and Cleveland. An estimated 44 million people live within the path of totality, with another couple hundred million within 200 miles (320 kilometers), guaranteeing the continent's biggest eclipse crowd ever.

Practically everyone on the continent will get to see a partial eclipse. You can watch the whole thing unfold online, too. NASA is offering several hours of streaming online from several cities along the totality path.

And don't forget your special glasses to safely watch the eclipse.

Here's more to know about Monday's celestial showstopper:

WHAT'S A TOTAL SOLAR ECLIPSE?

The moon will line up perfectly between the Earth and the sun at midday, blotting out the sunlight. The full eclipse will last longer than usual because the moon will be just 223,000 miles (360,000 kilometers) from Earth, one of the year's closest approaches. The closer the

moon is to Earth, the bigger it is in the sky from our perspective, resulting in an especially long and intense period of sun-blocked darkness. Totality will last the longest over Mexico at 4 minutes, 28 seconds. Elsewhere along the track, like in Syracuse, New York, totality will last just 1 1/2 minutes.

WHAT'S THE ECLIPSE PATH?

The moon's shadow will slice a diagonal line from the southwest to the northeast across North America, briefly plunging communities along the track into darkness. Totality will enter the continent at Mazatlan, Mexico, and exit at Newfoundland in Canada. In between, 15 U.S. states from Texas to Maine will experience totality, including snippets of Tennessee and Michigan. It will be a repeat for Cape Girardeau, Missouri, and Carbondale, Illinois, which were also in prime position for 2017's total solar eclipse.

LAST TOTAL SOLAR ECLIPSE IN THE U.S.?

The U.S. hasn't experienced a total solar eclipse since Aug. 21, 2017, although a "ring of fire" solar eclipse crossed a part of the country last October. The moon was too far away then to completely blot out the sun, leaving a brilliant, burning ring around our star. The dramatic "ring of fire" stretched from Oregon to Texas, and crossed over Central America and Colombia, before exiting over Brazil. Kerrville, Texas, just west of San Antonio, is back in the bull's-eye and expecting another packed house.

WHEN'S THE NEXT ONE?

After Monday, the next total solar eclipse won't occur until 2026. But it will graze the top of the world, dipping into Greenland, Iceland and Spain. The next one in 2027 will march across Spain and northern Africa, with totality lasting an incredible 6 1/2 minutes. North Americans will have to wait until 2033 for another total solar eclipse, but it will be limited to Alaska. In 2044, Western Canada, Montana and North Dakota will have front-row seats. And in 2045, the U.S. will once again experience a coast-to-coast total solar eclipse.

COURT APPROVES 3M SETTLEMENT OVER 'FOREVER CHEMICALS' IN PUBLIC DRINKING WATER SYSTEMS

HEALTH

Chemical manufacturer 3M will begin payments starting in the third quarter to many U.S. public drinking water systems as part of a multi-billion-dollar settlement over contamination with potentially harmful compounds used in firefighting foam and several consumer products, the company said.

St. Paul, Minnesota-based 3M announced this week that last year's lawsuit settlement received final approval from the U.S. District Court in Charleston, South Carolina.

The agreement called for payouts through 2036. Depending on what additional contamination is found, the amount paid out will range from $10.5 billion to $12.5 billion.

"This is yet another important step forward for 3M as we continue to deliver on our priorities. The final approval of this settlement and continued progress toward exiting all PFAS manufacturing by the end of 2025 will further our efforts to reduce risk and uncertainty as we move forward," 3M's chairman and CEO, Mike Roman, said in a news release.

The deal compensates water providers for pollution with per- and polyfluorinated substances, known collectively as PFAS — a broad class of chemicals used in nonstick, water- and grease-resistant products such as clothing and cookware.

PFAS have been described as "forever chemicals" because they don't degrade naturally in the environment. They've been linked to a variety of health problems, including liver and immune-system damage and some cancers.

The compounds have been detected at varying levels in drinking water nationwide. The Environmental Protection Agency in March 2023 proposed strict limits on two common types, PFOA and PFOS, and said it wanted to regulate four others. Water providers would be responsible for monitoring their systems for the chemicals.

The 3M settlement first announced in June came in a lawsuit by Stuart, Florida, one of about 300 communities that had filed similar suits against companies that produced firefighting foam or the PFAS it contained. The payment will help cover the costs of filtering PFAS from systems.

Some of the settlement money will help additional water systems test for contamination from PFAS, said Scott Summy, one of the lead attorneys for those suing 3M and other manufacturers. They have until June 2026 to apply for compensation if contamination is found.

"That's great news for American citizens who drink from that water," Summy said. "It'll help rid our public drinking water systems of PFAS, and that's the most important thing about the settlement."

Also, last June, DuPont de Nemours Inc. and spinoffs Chemours Co. and Corteva Inc. reached a $1.18 billion deal to resolve PFAS complaints by about 300 drinking water providers. Several states, airports, firefighter training facilities and private well owners also have sued.

NYSE
RING TRUE
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‘GODZILLA X KONG’ HAS SCALES AND SCALE BUT NOT MUCH ELSE

As the old saying goes, there are two kinds of people on this Earth: Those who like their movies with a giant evil ape swinging a vertebrae like a lasso while riding a kaiju controlled by a crystal, and those who don't.

The former types will have much to cheer in "Godzilla x Kong: The New Empire," a ground-stomping, radiation-spewing monster-mash feast. Technically, we are not on this Earth. We're inside it, in a subterranean jungle world that gives the movie's filmmakers an exotic, untrampled realm in which they try to chart some new ground for a pair of well-traveled beasts.

But aside from the film's strong Jules Verne streak, "Godzilla x Kong" is no drastic pivot for its long-in-the-tooth monsters. For that, you were better off catching last year's Toho-made "Godzilla Minus One," which grippingly returned to Godzilla's post-WWII origins and in the process won the 70-year-old lizard its first Oscar.

Other, less respectable creatures might have used an Academy Award as a springboard for more dramatic roles. But not Godzilla. No costume dramas for him, unless you count the robotic fist that Kong gets outfitted with midway through the movie.

No, we are back in the pure spectacle territory that has traditionally been Godzilla and King Kong's stomping ground. It's even a very small title tweak from the previous installment, "Godzilla vs. Kong," to "Godzilla x Kong." This one promises a team-up, with the frenemies joining forces to fight a mutual foe. If things keep up this way, we can look forward to "Godzilla xoxo Kong."

Returning director Adam Wingard kicks things off with his two stars separated, like star-crossed

Godzilla x Kong : The New Empire | Official Trailer

lovers, with only Earth's mantle in between. Godzilla roams above ground while Kong romps around in Hollow Earth. To humankind, this is a good arrangement that keeps city-destroying rampages to a minimum – though Godzilla's choice of bed, the Roman Coliseum, is surely unpopular among archeologists.

Every movement of each monster is closely tracked digitally. The humans in "Godzilla x Kong" verge on being bit players — or more like roving sports commentators — who spend most of their time trying to analyze what the goliaths are up to. It's a lean crew of scientist Ilene Andrews (Rebecca Hall), conspiracy-spouting podcaster Bernie (Brian Tyree Henry) and biologist Trapper (Dan Stevens) who fly into the Earth's center when Kong is hurt and confusing distress signals seem to emanating from the underworld. With them are Ilene's adoptive daughter Jia (Kaylee Hottle), the lone surviving member of the tribe that protected Kong's Skull Island.

Being in Hollow Earth takes some of the fun out of things. What good is a colossus when you can't fling it against a skyscraper? Some of that comes later in "Godzilla x Kong." But most of the film's thrills come out of the strange dimensions that can turn up around every corner. In Hollow Earth they stumble onto a host of lost civilizations and a cavernous lair held up by giant crystals that look like the roman numerals of a Super Bowl logo.

That also leaves "Godzilla x Kong" residing in a purely CGI arena without even tenuous connections to reality. It's a empty chamber for movie spectacle and nothing else, where the only option is to pile elements on top of each other

Ghostbusters: Frozen Empire - Godzilla x Kong: The New Empire | Official Trailer 2
Teaser Trailer

Godzilla x Kong: The New Empire | Tickets on Sale Trailer

until you have, you know, a giant evil ape swinging a vertebrae like a lasso while riding a kaiju controlled by a crystal.

But this mostly a very big, very simple tag team affair. The bad guys underground — the nasty gorilla Skar King and equally unpleasant lizard kaiju Shimo — eventually battle Kong and Godzilla in a finale that strips out the last vestige of reality, gravity, in a floating melee.

Who is there to root for here? Godzilla has first billing but it spends most of its time traipsing around the globe sucking up radiation. Of the humans, Hall does the most to bring something real to the movie. Kong, as he's been throughout this iteration of the franchise, is the main guy. But he's just on the lookout for a friend or two. His most emotional scene, like Nick Nolte in "Affliction," is due to a tooth ache. That, and the resulting yank via helicopter, prompted me to wish the movie was just a series of medical issues for an aging Kong. A knee replacement. Some reading glasses.

"Godzilla x Kong: The New Empire," a Warner Bros. release, is rated PG-13 by the Motion Picture Association for creature violence and action. Running time: 115 minutes. Two stars out of four.

BROWSING IN INCOGNITO MODE DOESN'T PROTECT YOU AS MUCH AS YOU MIGHT THINK

9:51 PM
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Although a private browsing mode known as "Incognito" in Google's widely used Chrome browser has been available for nearly a decade, a legal settlement involving the way it works has cast new attention on this commonly available setting.

The settlement disclosed this week in a federal court is primarily designed to ensure that users who use Incognito mode in Chrome get more privacy while surfing the internet than they had been previously.

Although Google isn't paying any money to consumers, the lawyers who filed the case in June 2020 believe the stricter safeguards will be worth $4.75 billion to $7.8 billion, based on the estimated value of the personal information protected by the settlement.

Nearly every major browser now has a private browsing mode. Here's a look at what they do and don't do for surfers.

WHAT PRIVATE BROWSING ACTUALLY DOES

When you turn on your browser's private mode, think of it as a fresh start.

So all of the advantages of browser personalization won't be there: No suggestions based on your history, autocomplete will be largely unavailable and you will have to sign into your accounts.

As soon as you close your incognito window, your internet browser wipes the browsing history and any cookies that have been created during that session, according to the Mozilla Foundation, meaning -- locally to your device — your browser won't remember where you've

been or store any information you filled into any forms.

This kind of experience does have its uses. For example, making sure searches on more sensitive topics, like health care, don't show up in your browsing history (which may invite related ads to start showing up). Or perhaps you'd like added protection when surfing — or logging onto accounts — on public computers, like at the library or a hotel business center.

WHAT PRIVATE BROWSING DOESN'T DO

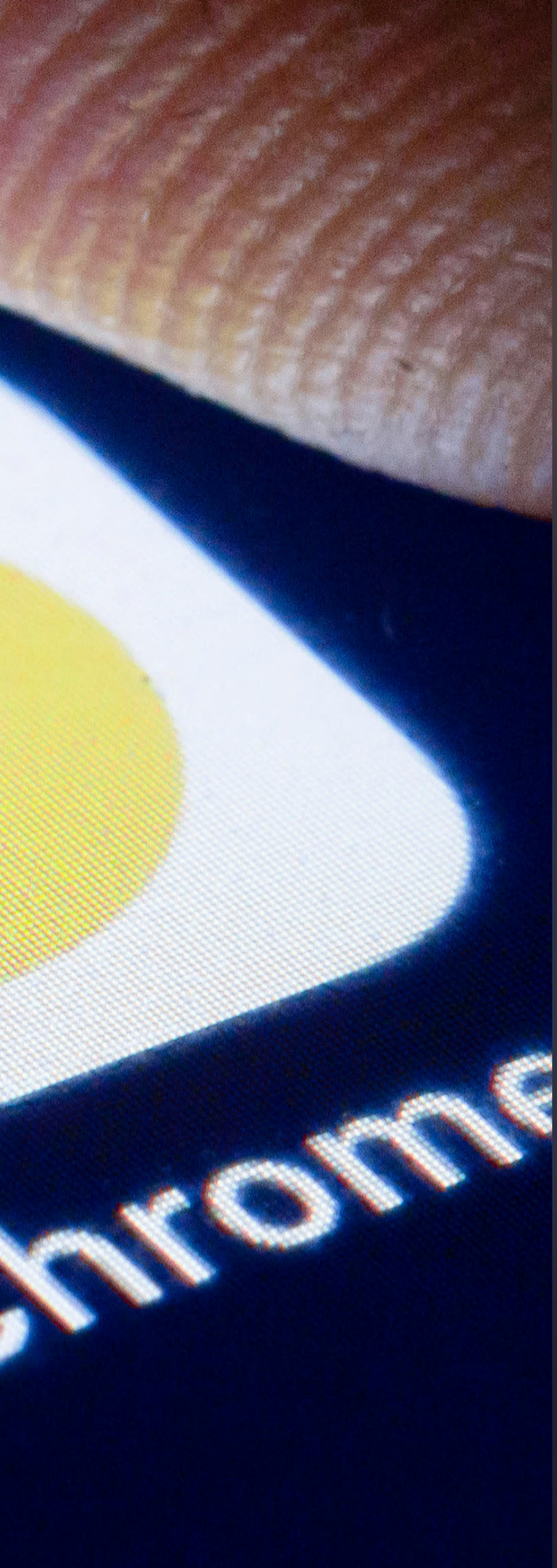
Remember that the point of a private browsing mode is not to cover the fact that you visited a website but to cover the fact that you visited that site from your device.

Incognito modes generally do not prevent the websites you visit from seeing your location, via your IP address, or stop your internet service provider from logging your activities. As long as your IP address is visible, the Mozilla Foundation says your identity and activity remain fully exposed to search engines and third parties — think advertisers — regardless of what mode your browsing in.

To illustrate this point, Google recently agreed to purge billions of records containing personal information collected from people using incognito mode to surf the internet as part of a settlement over a lawsuit accusing the search giant of illegal surveillance. It also has to be make more prominent privacy disclosures in its terms of service to let people know about its data collection efforts.

Google will also be required to set up Incognito mode so users will be able to automatically

SPEED
UNLOCK YOUR POTENTIAL



block "cookies" that enable third parties to track them during the next five years if a federal judge approves the settlement after a court hearing scheduled July 30.

And any files you may download or bookmarks you create during a private session are not wiped at the end of your session, meaning you are still susceptible to computer viruses, malware and keystroke loggers.

ARE THERE OPTIONS FOR MORE PRIVATE BROWSING?

A virtual private network can run interference for your IP address, making it harder for sites to track you. But the use of VPNs also raises additional security questions, especially for users who go with a free or cheap VPN provider they haven't carefully vetted.

Some search engines like DuckDuckGo are more privacy focused and have pledged to never collect personal information or track people entering queries on its site. And certain browsers like Tor are designed to make it more difficult for third-party trackers and advertisers to track you.

Even with all of these options, just remember that it's unlikely that you're truly anonymous online.

AS INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL GROWS, SO DOES US USE OF TECHNOLOGY. A LOOK AT HOW IT'S USED AT AIRPORTS

The Belgian family of four was on their fourth trip to the United States. They had been dreading the long line at passport control when they entered the country but had heard about a new app they could use to ease their way and decided to give it a shot. Within minutes, they had bypassed the long line at Washington Dulles International Airport and were waiting for their luggage.

"It was always a long row," said Piet De Staercke of the line to go through passport screening. He, his wife and two sons were visiting Washington and Chicago. "We were a bit scared. But now with the app, it's amazing."

As travel continues to boom following coronavirus pandemic-related slumps, U.S. Customs and Border Protection is expanding the use of technology like the Mobile Passport Control app the De Staercke family used in an effort to process the ever-growing number of passengers traveling internationally. And with events like a rare solar eclipse, the Olympics in Paris, and summer holidays still driving international travel, those numbers don't look set to drop anytime soon.

Customs and Border Protection officials gave The Associated Press a behind-the-scenes look at some of the technologies they've been using and what to expect in the months and years ahead.

THE NUMBERS

During fiscal year 2023, the agency processed over 394 million travelers at the ports of entry. That's a 24% increase over the previous year. When looking at the country's top 20 airports by passenger volume, officers processed 31% more travelers while average wait times increased 11%. And at some of the busiest airports, the wait times

have had negligible increases or even decreased. At JFK Airport in New York, for example, wait times went down — by 0.4 of a second on average — while CBP officers processed 33% more travelers.

Increasingly, people are traveling internationally with their families rather than going abroad alone for business.

MORE APPS

Officials are moving more toward app-based technologies to speed passengers' movement through the airport. The Mobile Passport Control app used by the Belgian family is one example. It's available to U.S. citizens, but also to lawful permanent residents, certain Canadians and travelers from countries who are part of the Visa Waiver Program who've already been to the U.S. at least once.

Passengers upload their photos and information to the app. When they enter the screening area, they get routed to a separate line. The officer then just needs to take a photo of one member of the family and it pulls up the entire group's photos and their information.

CBP launched the app in 2021 but is now trying to get more people to use it, including by working with airlines to allow the app to be downloaded while the plane is in flight and putting up signs at airports to let travelers know about it. Last year, a record 4.1 million people came into the country using the app.

"Any second that we can save through the process, it saves time because it adds up eventually," said Marc Calixte, the top CBP official at Dulles.

Last September, the agency also created an app specifically for passengers who use Global Entry. That's one of the "Trusted Traveler" programs CBP runs that allows certain low-risk passengers who make an appointment for an interview and submit to a background check to travel through customs and passport control more quickly when they arrive in the U.S.

IMPROVEMENTS TO GLOBAL ENTRY

Last year saw a record 3.2 million people apply to the Global Entry program, and this year the agency is on track to field about 4 million applications, said Brendan Blackmer, CBP branch chief for the Trusted Traveler Programs. But passengers have complained about how long it can take to get applications processed and their struggles to get appointments. On its website, CBP says it averages four to six months to process applications. In February, 17 members of Congress wrote to CBP demanding information, saying they were fielding complaints from constituents over the wait times.

Blackmer said the agency has pushed to improve the process, including by allowing nearly 100% of people renewing their status to do so without having to come into an enrollment center. That frees up appointments for first-time applicants. And it's pushing for more people to be able to complete the process while they're in the airport, either leaving or returning from a trip.

There are also more appointments available, Blackmer said, although some cities like San Francisco are still seeing so much demand that appointments can take more than 90 days to get.

"We've done a lot of work the past year and a half, and the agency's in a better position now and able to meet the demand for the program. And we're going to continue to work," Blackmer said.

FEE INCREASES

Come Oct. 1, people using some of the Trusted Traveler Programs will see increases to the fees they pay. The cost of NEXUS, a U.S.-Canadian program designed to ease travel between the two countries for pre-approved travelers, will go from $50 to $120. Global Entry will go from $100 to $120. SENTRI, for pre-approved travelers on the southern border with Mexico, will go down, from $122.50 to $120.

But the fees will now cover all kids under 18 regardless of which program you're in.

What's unchanged is that approval for the programs will still be good for five years.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Calixte said possibly by the end of summer the airport will be opening so-called E-Gates where passengers using Global Entry can use the app, bypass an officer at a booth, and instead go to a gate where their photo is taken and matched to their passport, and, assuming no red flags arise, the gates open and they pass out of the customs and passport control area and are on their way.

Further on the horizon, Blackmer said the agency is exploring a concept called smart queuing, where the app assigns passengers to certain lines depending on information they have entered into the app, such as whether they have goods to declare.

BIDEN ADMINISTRATION APPROVES THE NATION'S EIGHTH LARGE OFFSHORE WIND PROJECT

The Biden administration approved a new wind project off the Massachusetts coast Tuesday that is large enough it will provide more electricity than the state's former coal-fired generating station.

Avangrid's New England Wind is the United States' eighth large offshore wind project to be greenlit and is tied for the largest ever approved, but will probably be smaller.

Avangrid says it will be smaller than the 129 turbines that won approval, and each wind turbine will be smaller as well, so the actual output will be closer to 1,900 megawatts than the maximum 2,600. Those 1,900 megawatts could power up to 1 million homes and businesses in southern New England.

Coastal Virginia Offshore Wind is a 2,600-megawatt project, to be built east of Virginia Beach, Virginia.

The last operating coal-fired power plant in Massachusetts, Brayton Point, closed in 2017 as environmental groups pushed for cleaner sources of electricity. It was the largest coal-fired generating station in New England, pumping out 1,600 megawatts of electricity for local homes and businesses. That site will now be used to support the offshore wind industry.

Ken Kimmell, Avangrid's chief development officer, said New England Wind is also larger than other well-known plants in New England, including a nuclear plant in New Hampshire and a natural gas-fired plant in Massachusetts. Kimmell said Tuesday's approval is a huge milestone.

"It's a lot of energy to be added to the grid, which we desperately need. We need clean

PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES
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energy and new capacity to replace coal and nuclear plants that are retiring," Kimmell said. "These wind farms are of such size and scale that they offer the region clean energy and a pathway to keep the lights on."

It's an indication of how far renewable energy has come that wind and solar projects are now the same size as nuclear, coal and gas plants, even if they don't produce day and night without additional storage.

New England Wind will be situated south of Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, and built in two phases.

Avangrid and Copenhagen Infrastructure Partners are also currently building a wind farm off the Massachusetts coast. Vineyard Wind began delivering electricity to the power grid in February from five of its planned 62 wind turbines. The 800-megawatt project will generate electricity for 400,000 Massachusetts homes and businesses when it is fully constructed.

The Interior Department has approved more than 10 gigawatts of clean energy from offshore wind projects in less than three years, enough to power nearly 4 million homes. The nation's seventh large offshore wind project, Sunrise Wind, east of Montauk, New York, was approved just last week.

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